

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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An anime-style illustration featuring two characters. In the upper half, a young man with short, dark blue hair and large, expressive purple eyes is shown from the chest up. He has a wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression of shock or surprise, with a single sweat drop on his forehead. He is wearing a dark blue jacket over a white shirt. His right hand is raised, with fingers spread, as if reaching out or gesturing. In the lower half, a young woman with short, dark brown hair and large, expressive golden-yellow eyes is shown. She also has a wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression of shock. She is wearing a pink top with a white collar. Her left hand is raised, with fingers spread, mirroring the gesture of the man above her. The background is a simple, light yellow gradient. The overall style is typical of Japanese manga or anime art.

Mitsuki!

Yuuto cried out her name, his face wracked with shock. His voice seemed somehow distant. His figure blurred and grew dim...

Yuu-kun...!

The **Master** of Ragnarok &
Blessor of **Einherjar** **8**



Fire!
Unleash
everything
you can!

I still
believe
in you, Big
Brother.

Your
precious
friends the
Wolf Clan
won't be
coming to
your aid this
time! Go
ahead and
flee now, if
you value
your lives!

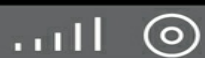
WITH YUUTO STILL ABSENT, THE BATTLE OF KÖRMT RIVER COMMENCES!



This is a proper ritual, so I'll need to wear the appropriate attire.

Wh-wh-whoa!
Wh-what are you doing?!

She knew that the others couldn't see Rifa, but she still felt them looking in her direction, and it made her uncomfortable all the same. After all, this girl had the same face as her.



c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

ACT 6

ACT 7

ACT 8

EPILOGUE 1

EPILOGUE 2

AFTERWORD

Characters

A character with long, flowing blonde hair and a crown-like headpiece, wearing a light-colored, ruffled dress.

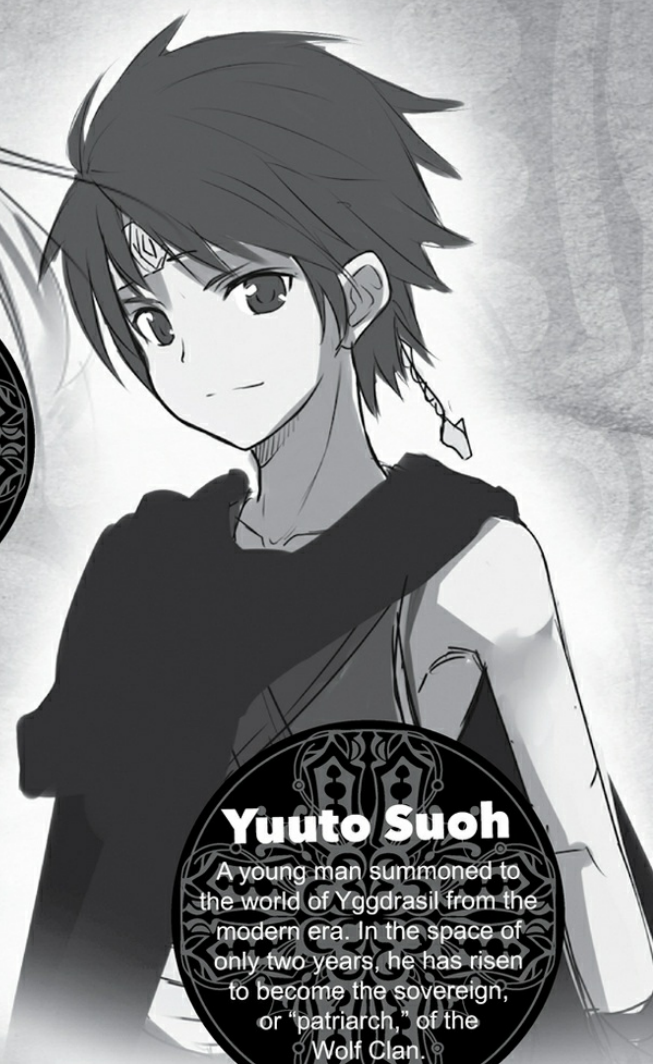
Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.

A character with short, spiky blonde hair, wearing a dark, high-collared dress with a white sash.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Managarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

A character with short, dark, spiky hair, wearing a dark, high-collared tunic with a white sash.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. In the space of only two years, he has risen to become the sovereign, or "patriarch," of the Wolf Clan.

A character with short, spiky blonde hair in pigtails, wearing a dark, high-collared dress with a white sash.

Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan. She once attacked the Wolf Clan but lost to Yuuto, and ended up becoming his sworn younger sister.

A character with short, dark hair, wearing a dark, high-collared dress with a white sash.

Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.

Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's childhood friend and beloved. After Yuuto is summoned to Yggdrasil, she maintains contact with him and provides support.

Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch, Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.

Ephelia

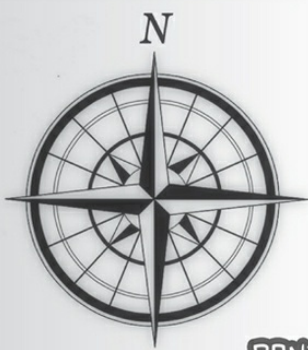
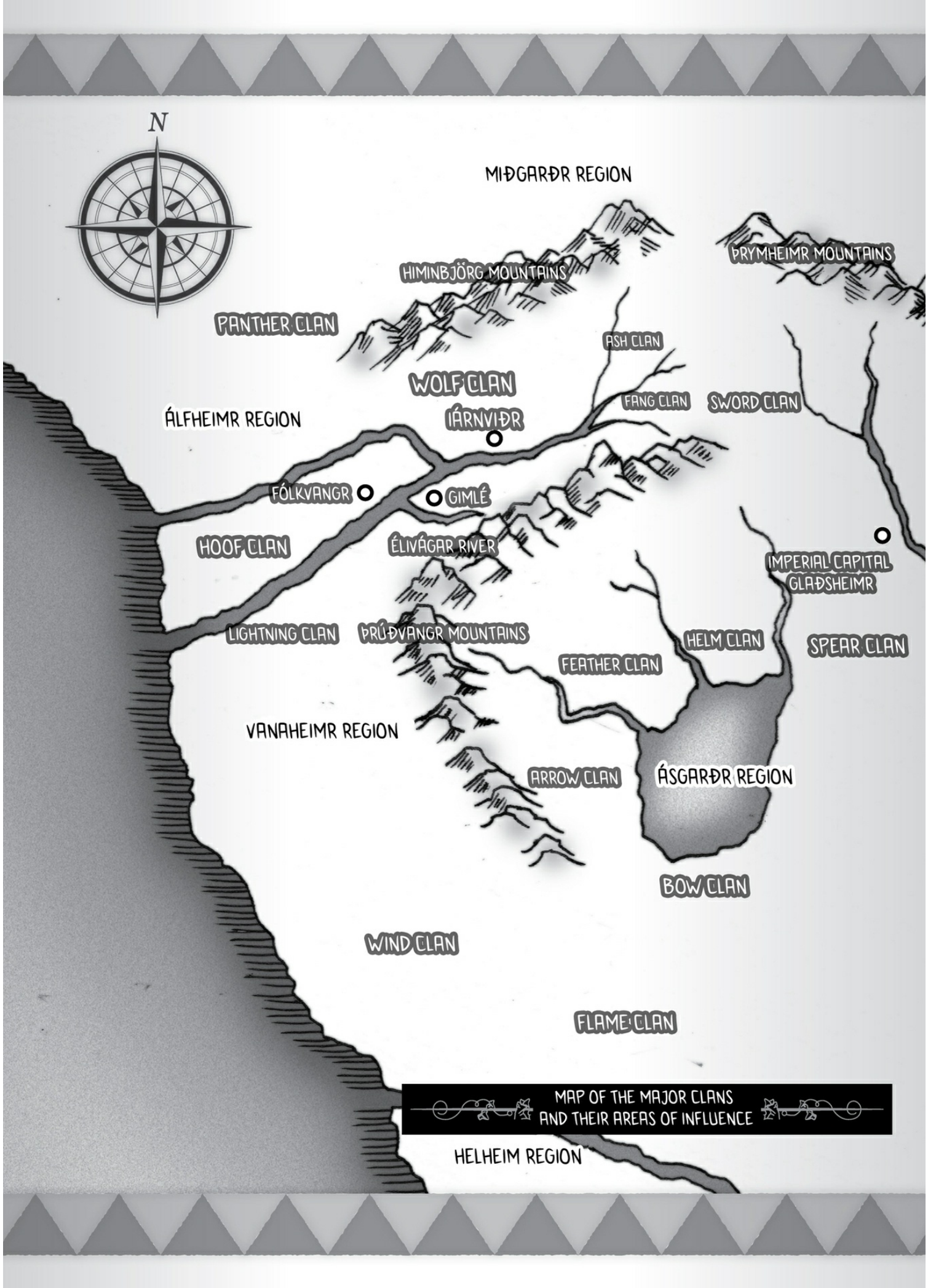
A young girl rescued by Yuuto when he found her being sold by a slave trader. She now works as a servant in the Wolf Clan palace.

Hveðrungr

The masked patriarch of the Panther Clan, his true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth. He is an Einherjar with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.

Steinþórr

Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar in possession of two runes. It is said there are only a few such people in all of Yggdrasil.



MIDGARDR REGION

HIMINBJÖRG MOUNTAINS

PRYMHEIMR MOUNTAINS

PANTHER CLAN

ASH CLAN

WOLF CLAN

FANG CLAN

SWORD CLAN

IÁRNVÍÐR

ÁLFHEIMR REGION

FÓLKVANGR

GIMLÉ

HOOF CLAN

ÉLIVÁGAR RIVER

IMPERIAL CAPITAL
GLÁÐSHEIMR

LIGHTNING CLAN

PRÚÐVANGR MOUNTAINS

FEATHER CLAN

HELM CLAN

SPEAR CLAN

VANAHEIMR REGION

ARROW CLAN

ÁSGARÐR REGION

BOW CLAN

WIND CLAN

FLAME CLAN

MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS
AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

HELHEIM REGION

Prologue

“You are *truly* sure about this? You have no regrets about this choice?” Felicia’s voice was cautious, in a way which emphasized the weight behind her question.

The moon shone in the sky above, its slightly elliptical shape resembling a large, bright orange. It was the middle of the night, out in the middle of the rural countryside, so there was no one else around.

With Mitsuki’s smartphone pressed against his ear, Yuuto looked up at the sky and then closed his eyes. He meditated on Felicia’s question; its meaning.

Several images passed before his eyes, rising and sinking from the depths of his memory.

Yuuto certainly hadn’t come to dislike Japan; far from it. He had a deep affection for it. He was reluctant to leave it behind. It was the land that had sheltered and raised him for fourteen years, after all.

But even so...

Yuuto slowly opened his eyes. In front of him stood his childhood friend, and she gave him a strong, reassuring nod.

If this girl was willing to be by his side, and if it was for the sake of protecting his precious family, he didn’t have even the slightest hesitation over his decision.

“That’s right,” he answered. “Felicia, summon me to your world again. I’m going to live with all of you from here on out.”

On the other end of the phone line, Felicia was so overcome with happiness, she broke down into sobbing. “...Oh, th-thank you... so much... Big Brother... ohh...”

Previously, she had told him that she would respect his wishes above all else, and that surely was no lie, but there was also no doubting the fact that she had wanted him to come back to her world if at all possible.

Even back in the days when Yuuto was still helpless and useless to the people

around him, she had been there for him, eventually even choosing to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with him. She was someone who had always been faithful and devoted to him.

Yuuto felt the corners of his mouth pull up into a soft smile. "Yeah. I'm honestly happy at the thought of being able to see you again."

"...Yes!" *sob* "I am as well. I had thought... that I might never be able to see you again..."

"We'll always be together from now on."

"Right!" Felicia replied, joyfully. "Then I shall begin preparations for the ritual right away!"

"Ah, about that. Um, I want to bring Mitsuki with me, too. Do you think you can do that?"

ACT 1

The gentle sunlight pouring in through the window caused Tetsuhito Suoh to slowly open his eyes.

Above him were the wooden boards of the ceiling and the old-style Japanese light fixture hanging down from it: a light bulb inside a wooden frame covered by fibrous *washi* paper.

He sat himself up and took a glance around his room. The floor space was covered by haphazardly discarded clothes and trash, so that one couldn't even see the tatami mat flooring underneath.

Back when his wife was still alive, things had been different; even if he'd carelessly tossed his dirty clothes on the floor, they would always get tidied up while he was away at work.

And in the mornings, upon leaving the bedroom, his nose had always been greeted by the delicious smell of fresh miso soup.

But now, such things would no longer ever—

“Hm?” As soon as Tetsuhito left his room, he found himself sniffing the air. It was faint, but certain: the scent of freshly cooked miso and rice.

As if pulled along by the smell, he made his way to the living room. On the table sat rice with fried eggs, salted grilled fish and miso soup — all the parts of a traditional Japanese breakfast, lined up and waiting.

“Oh, hey. Morning, Dad. I was just about to go call for you.” The young man who greeted him did so in a slightly brusque tone, with his face turned away as if he were embarrassed. That face bore a slight resemblance to Tetsuhito's late wife.

This was Yuuto Suoh, Tetsuhito's only son, who for the past three years had been missing, his whereabouts unknown.

Compared to three years ago, he was much taller.

His voice was deeper, too.

His features were more adult, his face more like that of a man.

Tetsuhito had been face-to-face with his son several times since his return, but he still couldn't help feeling strange about the gap between the Yuuto he saw now and the one from three years ago.

Tetsuhito hid his unsettled inner feelings behind his usual, slightly grumpy-looking expression, and looked down at the food. "Morning. What brought all this on?"

As soon as he said the words, he regretted them.

He was pretty sure there was a better way for him to say things like this. This part of him was what had caused his son to hate him, but it wasn't an easy thing to fix.

However, though his son frowned and looked a little displeased, he didn't break off the conversation there. Yuuto just gave a short laugh. "Heh, well you helped me out yesterday. And, well. This is also kind of an apology for misunderstanding you all this time."

He said this with his face still turned to the side. The way he grew embarrassed in situations like this — perhaps that part of Yuuto more resembled Tetsuhito himself.

"Hmph," said Tetsuhito. "Well, if you've already gone and made it... I'll eat it."

"O-okay."

The two of them sat down in their chairs, both rather awkwardly.

Just as Yuuto had said, their talk yesterday had, if nothing else, relieved the tension and ill feelings between them. That said, they had still been completely separated for almost three years. Tetsuhito didn't have the slightest idea what to say or talk about with his son.

He was terrible at conversation by nature to begin with, and he had spent his life devoted solely to making swords and nothing else (or rather, he had foolishly allowed himself to live that way). And so, he was extremely unskilled at dealing with other people.

Here my son is making the effort to bridge the gap, and yet I'm such a

disappointment, Tetsuhito thought to himself with reproach.

As he was reflecting this, Yuuto took a sip from the reddish-brown soup bowl in front of him, then gave a wry smile and spoke up again.

“Sorry. The miso soup’s not even the right temperature, is it? And the flavor’s too thin. I’m a hell of a long way from being anywhere near as good as Mom.”

“Today was your first time trying,” Tetsuhito assured him. “Of course you’re not going to approach her level of skill that easily.”

“Yeah, true. Mom really was something, wasn’t she?”

“...Yeah.” Finally able to simply and honestly agree with his son, Tetsuhito felt a sense of relief, as well as a sense of gratitude toward his wife.

Compared to his own clumsy, obstinate self, he felt Yuuto’s responses were much more mature. It was a bit moving to see how well his son had grown over these three years.

Tetsuhito felt joy at his son’s growth, but the fact that he hadn’t been able to be there to see it also left him with a sense of sadness. Loneliness, even.

Yuuto’s next words only confirmed his suspicions. “So uh, I know it’s kind of bad to say this so soon after we’ve patched things up. But... I’ve got to leave again.”

Tetsuhito already knew.

His son had long since left the nest, left his protection, and become his own man.

“I’m... probably never going to come back here again,” Yuuto said, looking Tetsuhito straight in the eyes. “B-but it’s not ’cause I hate you or anything, nothing like that. It’s just that the circumstances aren’t gonna let me.”

Yuuto’s mouth was dry with nerves, and his fists were tightly clenched under the table, his palms sweating. In the end, telling this to his father was definitely hard for him to do.

In part because of their three-year lack of communication, their interactions this morning had been a little strained and awkward, but any hatred he’d had for his father was completely gone now.

Yuuto's grudge against his father had come from the incident involving his mother, but now he knew that had been only a misunderstanding. There was also the fact that he'd grown psychologically over the past three years, and had a better understanding of the fact that Tetsuhito was just a man who was clumsy when it came to dealing with others.

There were no hard feelings left, and Yuuto was once again acknowledging the man as his father. That was exactly why he felt a strong sense of guilt at leaving behind his one remaining blood relative to be alone in this house.

Tetsuhito took a sip of his tea, then gave a long exhale. "...Yggdrasil, was it?"

"Ah! You know about it?" Yuuto raised his voice in surprise.

His father responded to his panicked question by shrugging his shoulders and giving a wry laugh. "I've gotten most of the gist of it from Mitsuki-chan. Regularly. She's a good girl."

"I see. Damn that Mitsuki. She went and did that behind my back and never even said a damned word to me." Yuuto grumbled and complained, but he had a subtle smile on his face.

I'm seriously marrying a girl I don't deserve, he thought to himself.

If she had brought up the topic back while he was still living in Yggdrasil, it wasn't hard to imagine that he would have been prideful and obstinate and said, *"You don't need to do that!"* or something to that effect.

Mitsuki understood that about him, and so must have deliberately *not* asked for his permission, and given reports on his well-being to Tetsuhito, who would have been worried about him.

Following that train of thought, Yuuto realized something else. "My smartphone... Dad, thanks for not canceling the phone plan, and for paying the bill every month for me. It really helped me out."

Yuuto bowed his head and expressed his heartfelt gratitude.

It was something he should have been able to figure out with just a little bit of thought. Indeed, he'd probably realized it deep down for a long time now.

The reason Yuuto's smartphone was still able to make calls and connect to the

internet was because someone kept paying the bill for it.

He'd simply been unable to admit that to himself, and pretended not to realize it, keeping himself from thinking about it.

But now he was able to come to terms with the reality and accept it.

"I just forgot about it, is all," Tetsuhito said. "You've seen the house; I'm the type who lets things go untended."

"Yup, sure, I figured that might be the case, but even still, it really did help me, so at least let me thank you."

"Don't bother. Being thanked when I haven't done anything feels wrong." Tetsuhito furrowed his brow and his normally-sour expression got even more sour.

At first glance, it looked like he was upset, but Yuuto realized this was simply his way of hiding his embarrassment.

It had been a long time coming, but Yuuto was finally getting an understanding of the kind of person his father was.

He was bashful and shy, awkward and clumsy; the old-fashioned type of man who thought it was shameful to express one's emotions; devoted to craftsmanship and earnest to a fault.

What a pain in the neck father I've got, Yuuto thought to himself with a wry grin.

"Well then, I guess I'll ask you properly now," Yuuto said. "Sorry, but would you keep paying the bill for my phone plan for me? I'll give you this as an advance payment on it."

Yuuto held out the headpiece made of pure gold that he'd worn as part of his outfit in Yggdrasil.

As an ornament that served as a symbol of the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, it was an item very precious to the clan, but he didn't have much other choice here.

Considering what the future might hold in store, maintaining his phone's ability to communicate with the network in the modern world was a matter of

utmost priority.

“You’re not just asking for a favor, you want to pay for it yourself, huh?” Tetsuhito remarked. “Looks like you’ve grown up a bit.”

“I should have, what with all I’ve gone through in the other world.”

“Hmph, talking like a wise guy.” Tetsuhito trailed off, and mumbled under his breath, “You didn’t have to do that, I would have paid it for you anyway. Don’t treat your family member like a stranger.”

“Hm? What did you say?” Yuuto asked.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.” Tetsuhito folded his arms and scoffed. Despite agreeing to Yuuto’s request, for some reason, he looked a little sullen.

“Come on, what is it?” Yuuto asked. “Did I do something that upset you?”

“It’s not important. Don’t worry about it. Besides, instead of me, you should be busy thinking about how to pay back what you owe to Mitsuki-chan. She’s helped you out a whole lot for these three years, right? And if you’re not ever coming home again, then it’s all the more important...”

“Ah, right, that’s why I’m taking her with me.”

“Make sure you show your— what?!” Tetsuhito’s went wide-eyed, deepening the wrinkles on his brow, and he cried out in surprise.

Tetsuhito always seemed to wear a slightly grumpy, stone-faced expression, so seeing him give such a reaction was pretty rare. It showed just how shocking Yuuto’s words must have been.

Yuuto continued, as if launching a follow-up attack. “Oh, yeah, by the way, I’m getting married to her.”

“Wha... wh-what...?! ” Tetsuhito’s jaw dropped, and he couldn’t form any words.

This was perhaps the first time in Yuuto’s life that he’d seen his father this thrown off balance.

As he continued speaking, internally he celebrated a little bit.

“I mean, she’s coming with me to a remote and dangerous place like that,

after all. I've got to step up and take some responsibility, right?"

"N-no, that's... b-but w-wait, what about her parents?! Have you gotten their permission for this?!" Tetsuhito barely managed to stammer out the questions.

It was a perfectly natural thing to ask. And at the moment, it was the biggest dilemma on Yuuto's mind.

Yuuto took a long breath, exhaled, and then gave a wry grin and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's what I'm about to go do."



As Yuuto sat browsing the internet, Tetsuhito called up to him.

“Hey, Yuuto! Mitsuki-chan’s here!”

Yuuto glanced at the clock to see that it was already past four p.m., meaning school had let out. Time really did fly by when he was concentrating on things.

Yuuto raised his voice enough to be heard downstairs. “Yeah, I know! I’ll be right down!”

Quickly descending the stairs and making his way to the entrance, he found Mitsuki there smiling brightly at Tetsuhito.

When she noticed him, Mitsuki’s smile blossomed even more brightly. “Oh. Yuu-kun!”

It was different from before, when they’d been stuck in the space between childhood friends and lovers. Right now, she was officially Yuuto’s girlfriend, and the girl he’d made a promise to marry. With his father right there too, it felt a little embarrassing.

“I heard you were able to make up with your father,” said Mitsuki. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Ah, well, yeah, you know. ...Actually, I hear you were telling Dad about me this whole time?”

“Huh?! Oh, that’s, um...” In a flash, Mitsuki’s beaming expression changed to confusion, then nervousness as she hurried to explain herself.

Yuuto chuckled, and rested a hand gently on Mitsuki’s head. “Thanks.”

“Ah... Sure!” Her flustered body language disappeared in an instant, and she returned to a wide, happy grin. “You’re very welcome.”

This girl’s expressions really do turn on a dime, Yuuto reflected. It really gave him a sense of peace.

“Well, no sense standing around talking at the door; come on in,” Yuuto told her.

“Right, thanks for having me.” With that, Mitsuki took off her shoes inside the entrance space and placed them neatly beside the other pairs lined up there.

Those proper manners were befitting of a daughter of the Shimoya family, which had, for many generations, been in charge of the religious affairs of this rural community.

It was evident she had been raised well.

“Uh... a-ah... th-that’s right.” Tetsuhito suddenly spoke up as if he’d remembered something important. It sounded as if he were badly reading from a script. “I just remembered... I have some unfinished work I need to do. Yuuto, I’ll be in the workshop, so, um. I won’t be back for about four to five hours.” He hurriedly started to put on his shoes to leave.

The clearly bad acting was just too much. Yuuto scowled as bitterly as if he’d swallowed a bug and shouted at his father. “Hey, don’t go getting any stupid ideas, Dad! I didn’t ask her to come over here for... for that!”

“Ah... oh... um...” Mitsuki’s face turned red as a tomato.

Apparently she also understood what Tetsuhito was trying to do for Yuuto. She was a teenage girl, after all. She would have to have some interest in that sort of thing.

However, Yuuto really hadn’t asked her to come over for anything romantic today.

“We’re just going to discuss what we need to do to get ready for going to Yggdrasil! W-we’re not gonna do anything weird, okay?!” Yuuto was yelling, as much telling this to himself and Mitsuki as he was telling his father.

Indeed, that *was* the true reason Mitsuki had come to his house today.

After all, he was here in the modern world right now. Returning to Yggdrasil empty-handed would be a waste. What he wanted to do was get his hands on as many modern tools as possible that he could still use in Yggdrasil, and go back fully prepared.

For that purpose, he was planning to spend today looking through online stores with Mitsuki, but now his father had gone and made things weird.

There was just a little over half a month left until the next full moon, so time was limited. There was so much he had to do and think about, and if he got

sidetracked onto unnecessary thoughts like this, it was going to interfere with his ability to think straight, and that would come back to bite him hard later.

A bit indignantly, Yuuto explained all of this to his father.

“Hm, I see,” said Tetsuhito. “Sorry about that. I jumped to conclusions.”

“Yeah, you did, seriously...” Yuuto sighed and slumped his shoulders. He felt so awkward now.

“Still, if that’s what you’re doing, then it’ll get expensive,” Tetsuhito remarked. “Wait here for a minute.”

Tetsuhito turned on his heels and went to his own room, returning after a quick moment.

“Here, take this as my apology.” He tossed an envelope into Yuuto’s hands. “Use it however you like.”

Yuuto looked down at the envelope. It was something he had seen before: Right after he’d returned to the modern world, he had found it lying at the entrance to the house, addressed to him.

He remembered there was around 200,000 yen inside.

Back then, he’d been unwilling to accept it, and even now, it was far too much to be appropriate for an apology. However...

“All right. Thanks, Dad.” Yuuto held up the envelope and expressed his appreciation. “It really helps.”

“Mm.” Tetsuhito grunted brusquely, and gestured with his chin for the two teenagers to hurry and get going up to Yuuto’s room.

As always, the man was too embarrassed and clumsy to deal with these situations in words.

Faced with the countless rows of products, Yuuto couldn’t hold back a sigh of amazement. “Even though it’s all just a hundred yen, this is such a great selection...”

He was in a 100-yen-shop in the department store near the train station.

At first, he’d tried to just do the necessary shopping over the internet, but

sitting in that small room with Mitsuki, they had both tensed up every time their shoulders so much as touched. In the end, he'd decided he couldn't handle shopping in that awkward atmosphere.

"Y-you know, it's such good weather, it's a shame to do this cooped up in the house, why don't we go shopping outdoors?" he'd burst out at last.

"Y-you're right! This is the perfect day for shopping! ...Chicken."

With that exchange, the two of them had made an impromptu change to their plans and headed out together.

If Yuuto was being honest with himself, if he'd stayed in that situation, he wasn't sure he would have been able to keep from making a move on her.

Of course, technically they *were* each other's betrothed, so that wasn't exactly an issue, but it was only the first day after he'd confessed and proposed; it still felt unprincipled.

She was the person he'd sworn to spend the rest of his life with; Yuuto wanted to treat her as special, with respect.

"What do you think?" Mitsuki asked. "We should be able to get a lot here pretty cheaply, right?" She leaned forward just a bit and looked up at him proudly.

That playful aspect of her was incredibly cute, like a small baby animal, but Yuuto couldn't bring himself to say it out loud.

"Mm, yeah, you're right." He just nodded in agreement with her instead.

In fact, Yuuto had always left anything shopping-related to his mother in the past, and he had been absent from the modern world for three years now. He was pretty ignorant in these matters.

In fact, at first he'd intended to just walk around the interior of the department store normally, but Mitsuki had pulled him over here saying it would be better to start here.

Even with plenty of financial assistance from Tetsuhito, their funds still had a limit. The more cheaply they could get the things they needed, the better.

However, Yuuto furrowed his brow. "But, aren't you worried about the

quality? You know, ‘you get what you pay for.’”

Yuuto had the impression that cheaper goods were bound to break more easily. He was probably never going to be able to come back to this world, so for the things that were most essential, he wanted them to be solidly made.

“Of course there are things that it’s better to spend more money on for quality, but what about these, for example? Wouldn’t it be better to buy them here?” Mitsuki pointed confidently at a section full of various types and lengths of cables, hanging on hooks and sorted by type.

She ran over to grab one of them, and came back, holding it out to Yuuto.

“You need to make sure you have plenty of these, right?”

“Ahh, true, we *do* need a lot of these.” Yuuto looked down at the USB cable in his hand, and gave a wry grin.

The ability to charge their smartphones was of the utmost priority. They needed them to look up information, and to communicate with their families, along with many other important uses.

The very first thing he’d ordered from an online shop was four extra large solar-charging batteries. And the USB cables needed to hook those solar batteries up to their phones were thus an absolute necessity.

“If you go shopping for these at an electronics store, they’re several hundred yen apiece, you know,” said Mitsuki. “These things wear out anyway, so rather than focusing on quality, I think it’s probably better to focus on getting a lot of them. Even the more expensive ones have a habit of breaking.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

For Yuuto, it was no exaggeration to say that, during his life in Yggdrasil, his connector cable had been his lifeline. So he’d been very, very careful with handling it, but even then, it had still gotten really badly worn over three years. Going forward, if he was going to live in Yggdrasil permanently, he’d want a large supply of backups, just as Mitsuki was saying.

“And then there’s... Ah, over here!” Mitsuki called. “It’d be more convenient if you had a lot of these too, right?”

She pulled on his sleeve and brought him over to a section full of binoculars.

Yuuto had already ordered a good pair off of the internet, but these looked pretty useful too. They were not only cheap, but small and compact, so he could buy a bunch.

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Of course I have. After all, soon enough I’m going to be part of the Wolf Clan, too.”

“Uh, y-yeah, that’s true.” Yuuto felt a warmth in his chest, and a small smile spreading on his face.

The Wolf Clan was already a true family to him. He hoped that Mitsuki would come to like them, too.

The fact that she’d been thinking about the welfare of the Wolf Clan made him as happy as her thinking about him.

As the two of them walked home, Yuuto gave a wry chuckle. Both of his arms were laden with nylon bags stuffed full with the things they’d bought.

“We sure bought a lot, huh?” he commented.

“Yep, since it was cheap.”

He hadn’t originally intended to buy this much, but the price had been right, and he’d found himself tossing one item after another into the shopping basket.

100-yen-shops were a frightening place in that respect.

“Oh, that reminds me, we’re having curry tonight,” Mitsuki spoke up. “I know you like Mom’s curry. Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?”

“Good question...” Yuuto gave a bit of a pained smile.

Lately, evening meals at Mitsuki’s home always included at least one of Yuuto’s favorite dishes. It wasn’t hard to guess that was to motivate him to come eat dinner with them.

Mitsuki’s mother had the run of the kitchen, and she was showing that she approved of Yuuto as a potential boyfriend for her daughter. It was something to be grateful for, but it also made him feel a little guilty.

He steeled his resolve. He had to do things the right way.

With an intense and serious expression, Yuuto finally broached the subject.

“Tonight, I’m thinking I want to tell your parents about taking you to Yggdrasil with me.”

Mitsuki had been smiling up until this point, but at Yuuto’s statement, her expression froze, and she visibly tensed up.

“Y-you’re going to tell them?” she asked in a feeble voice.

He could practically hear her unspoken feelings on the matter: That situation was something she’d rather avoid if at all possible.

In truth, Yuuto himself felt much the same. Discussing their plans with her parents would surely be a mentally and emotionally taxing ordeal. Just thinking about it made his stomach hurt.

Honestly, he would love to avoid that confrontation if at all possible.

But even so, he had to.

“You know we can’t just *not* talk to them about this,” Yuuto said. “Think how shocking it would be for them to have their daughter suddenly just disappear.”

“Y-yeah, true. I-I guess it would be a little more than just a shock, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, it would.”

“B-but, still... They’re definitely not going to give you permission...” Mitsuki looked down at the ground, her expression pained.

Yuuto nodded. “Yeah, trying to convince them to let me take you is gonna be an uphill battle, that’s for sure.”

He’d be asking them to let their daughter be taken off to be married in some foreign land that was a hotbed of warfare, and she wouldn’t exactly be free to return whenever she wanted, either; in a worst case scenario, they’d never be able to see her again at all.

The chances they’d give him their approval were slim to none. In fact, any proper parent would be firmly and resolutely opposed.

“Um, maybe it would be better if we told them after we’ve already gone...” Mitsuki hedged.

“No, just running off like that is only gonna be our last resort.” Yuuto firmly shot down the suggestion.

Mitsuki’s mother had been a part of Yuuto’s life since he was very young, and had often taken care of him. Even now, she was supporting his and Mitsuki’s relationship. Yuuto couldn’t disrespect such a good person by eloping without a word; it would be inexcusable.

As luck would have it, there was still a decent amount of time left until the next full moon. The moral thing to do here was to do absolutely everything he could in that time to convince Mitsuki’s parents of his sincerity. He was going to be asking to take away their precious daughter, after all.

Of course, if it really came down to it, he was prepared to take her along with him no matter what, even if that made him into a kidnapper.

“In your dreams, you piece of shit punk!!” Mitsuki’s father Shigeru spat angrily, and slammed his arms against the table with enough force to knock over the teacups on top.

It was, of course, a perfectly natural response for someone who had just been told that a boy wanted to take his only daughter to some far-off place she might never come back from.

“I am serious about this,” Yuuto said. “I know exactly how selfish I am being. But please, give me your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

He withstood Shigeru’s indignant outburst without shrinking back and spoke calmly, looking the man straight in the eyes.

Shigeru’s face only grew more and more red. Yuuto understood that his words were only putting more fuel on the fire, but it was what he had to say, so there was no helping it.

“You’re not even a man, just some damn kid who didn’t even make it through school! What the hell do you think gives you the right?!”

“True; here, I’m not worth anything, and I haven’t accomplished anything. But

I can promise you at least that I will not let your daughter suffer from any financial burdens.”

“Don’t talk like you know, smartass! Like you have any idea just how hard it is to support a family...!”

“Ahh, that reminds me, Yuu-kun,” Miyo interrupted. “You said that in the other world, you were something like a king, right? I guess depending on how you think of it, she’d be marrying into wealthy royalty. Ooh, it’s just like something out of my Harlequin romance novels!”

Just as the family breadwinner Shigeru was trying to rant about the harsh reality of his role, Miyo cut in with a flighty remark and sighed wistfully.

In one remark, she’d turned the tense atmosphere in the room on its head.

Yep, that’s Mitsuki’s mother, all right, Yuuto thought with amusement.

“What are you even saying, honey?!” Shigeru shouted. “You know all of that crap’s just something he made up!”

“Well, I might not be ready to believe his whole story at face value, but that headpiece of his *was* made of pure gold, after all.”

“Ngh?!” Shigeru was dumbstruck.

As expected, the physical evidence had been much more effective than any verbal claims Yuuto could have made.

Personally, Yuuto didn’t like those sorts of gaudy ceremonial accessories, and he’d tried to avoid wearing them, but Jörgen had always stubbornly insisted that they were necessary to demonstrate the dignity and authority of the position of patriarch. Now he found himself feeling grateful to his second-in-command.

“He was able to get his hands on something like that in just three years, while still providing for himself, so maybe we don’t have to worry about things on that front,” Miyo went on.

“Hey, whose side are you even on?!”

“If you have to ask, I suppose my daughter’s side.”

“What?!”

“Wha?!” Yuuto asked, startled.

“Huh?!” Mitsuki squeaked.

Miyo’s words took all of them equally by surprise.

Yuuto had certainly never considered that Miyo would take his and Mitsuki’s side in this so easily.

“I... I... have you lost your *mind*, woman?!” Shigeru finally shouted.

Shigeru’s remark to his wife was over the line, but nobody at the table was inclined to blame him for it at that moment.

Miyo herself didn’t seem to be perturbed in the slightest, and chuckled. “Oh, I’m pretty sure my head’s on straight. My mind’s just focused on making sure my daughter can be with the person she loves.”

“Rrgh...! That’s only true right *now*! Y-young people fall for each other all the time at the drop of a hat; if you bet your whole life on those feelings, you’ll just end up miserable! Once she’s over him, she’ll find someone else.”

“I wonder if she’ll be so lucky, though...” Miyo put a hand to her cheek and sighed.

Shigeru’s argument was from common sense, and certainly was supported by how things often went in the real world, but his wife shook her head in resignation.

“This girl of ours has been going on and on about nothing but Yuu-kun ever since she was a little thing, after all.”

“M-M-Mom?!” Mitsuki blushed and grew flustered, and began waving her hands to try to stop her mother from saying more.

Even though the two of them had already professed their feelings to each other, apparently Mitsuki still felt embarrassed at having her mother talk about just how long she’d loved Yuuto with him right in front of her.

“They say young love is lucky to last for more than three months, but she’s been the same ever since elementary school,” Miyo went on. “And you know

how they say long-distance relationships never work, but things haven't changed at all for her over these last three years. This isn't just some delusion or fleeting young crush, you can be sure of that much."

"Mom..." Deeply touched, Mitsuki began to tear up.

"A woman's true and greatest happiness is in being able to be with the person she loves." Miyo smiled. "And I've known Yuu-kun here since he was a little boy. I have faith that he can make Mitsuki happy."

Yuuto gasped. "Th-thank you... thank you very much." His voice trembled a bit.

Yuuto had no real standing here; he'd effectively been a runaway and a delinquent for three years. He was overcome with happiness that Miyo was willing to recognize someone like him as a worthy partner for her only daughter.

Shigeru, by contrast, did not. His shouts indicated that things were hardly going to go as easily with him.

"W-well, my wife might be okay with it, but I'm not! I'm not allowing this, you hear?!"

He was clearly even more upset than before thanks to the fact that he felt betrayed by his wife having taken the other side.

"If you just reject him out of hand without listening, we can't really discuss this, now can we, dear?" Miyo asked calmly.

"Discuss?! We don't need to discuss anything! No means no, and that's all there is to it!"

"Oh, there you go getting all stubborn. I can't tell which one of you is the real child here."

"Child...?! That's going too far, and you know it!!"

"Oh, really? But it's true. Right now, Yuu-kun is acting much more calm and mature than you are."

"Grrrrr...!"

Seeing that the two were starting to get a little heated with each other, Yuuto hurriedly intervened. “U-um, please don’t fight. This is my fault, after all. I can leave and we can try this again another day.”

He was incredibly grateful that Miyo had taken his side, but he didn’t want that to cause a rift between her and her husband and make things worse for everyone.

He was already trying to take away their only daughter; he didn’t want to harm their relationship with each other. No apology would ever make up for it if that happened.

However, Miyo ignored Yuuto’s concern and grew even more assertive. “Look, see? That’s an adult.”

“Rrrgh...! Fine. I’ll at least hear him out. That’s all I have to do, right?!”

Giving up, Shigeru thumped his elbow down on the table and rested his chin against his hand. “Hm-hm! Now *that’s* more like the man I married,” Miyo said happily.

“Hmph!” Shigeru turned aside sullenly at his wife’s compliment.

Miyo giggled at this, then winked at Yuuto. It seemed that their little argument had been little more than a ploy on Miyo’s part to get Shigeru to concede to having a real discussion.

She was a woman who might come off as carefree and gentle, but she knew exactly how to pull the leash, as it were, on her husband when it counted.

Yuuto shuddered at the thought that, in the future, he might well find himself completely wrapped around Mitsuki’s finger in much the same way.

Still, at the same time, that also seemed to him like quite a happy future to look forward to.

“So, Yuuto, was it?” Shigeru asked pointedly.

“Y-yes, sir!” Yuuto reflexively sat up perfectly straight, at full attention.

Shigeru’s expression was as foul as ever, but there wasn’t as much burning anger in his eyes anymore; he seemed a bit more composed.

“So you want to take my only daughter, still in her teens, and go off together. You should have known that we’d be fiercely opposed to letting you do that, right?”

“Yes. I knew, and I was prepared for it to be a very long fight to convince you both. Actually, I can hardly believe Aunt Miyo so readily took our side in the matter.”

“Oh, my. If you ask me, I find *that* surprising,” Miyo put in. “I’ve always thought of you like my own child, Yuu-kun. And if you marry Mitsuki, I really will be able to call you my son. Of *course* I’d approve of this.”

Miyo puffed out her cheek in annoyance; a childish gesture a little unbecoming for her age. That cute, slightly childish mannerism was so much like Mitsuki. The two of them really were similar.

“Let’s just put that aside for now,” Shigeru said, waving a hand dismissively at his wife.

“Well!” Miyo responded indignantly.

The way the two of them were so open and unreserved with each other must have come from their long years of being together in marriage. Even when they argued and fought, they showed a certain understanding of each other, which indicated a good relationship.

“So if you already knew I was just going to be against it, why did you come here to discuss it with us?” Shigeru asked.

“I’m sorry?” Yuuto tilted his head to the side, not understanding the question at first. “Well, I couldn’t just leave without telling you. That would be wrong, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right.” Shigeru nodded. “But you could have just eloped with her, and then informed us after the fact. That would have been faster and easier. And we wouldn’t have been able to stop you, after all. But now that you’ve told us, we can try and guard against that. You’re not stupid; I can tell that much about you just from having talked to you these past few days. So why did you go out of your way to come here and let us try and stand in your way? Why did you choose the option that would be the most trouble for you?”

Shigeru was looking directly into Yuuto's eyes as he asked these questions.

Yuuto got the sense that his character as a man was being tested here. He was being measured, to see if he was worthy of being entrusted with Shigeru's daughter.

Yuuto swallowed, and then slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"You're right, sir. If I just wanted to be together with Mitsuki, that would be the most certain method of achieving that. However, if I did things that way, that would just make you scared and worried about your daughter, wouldn't it? You wouldn't be able to trust that such a cowardly man could really make Mitsuki happy."

"Hmm."

"I've learned a lot of lessons over the past three years, and one of them is this: Choosing to take the easy way out in the moment will only make things worse down the line. It's true that it will likely be very difficult for me to get full consent from both of you, but I believe that I should do everything I can to prove myself to you in good faith, and try to get you to see me as an acceptable person. As the man who is taking away your precious daughter, I thought that was the absolute minimum I owed you."

"...I see. I understand now why my wife thinks well of you," Shigeru said grudgingly. "You're pretty decently put together for your age. I still don't believe any of that stuff about a parallel world, but whatever you've been doing for the last three years, I can definitely see that it was good for you."

"Th-thank you very much."

"Hmph. It's too early to thank me. Whether or not I hand my daughter over to you is another matter entirely."

"I understand, sir." Yuuto nodded. "I didn't expect to be able to earn your approval in just one day, either. If you'll spare the time for me, I would like to come discuss this with you as many times as necessary."

"Well, in that case, let's take our time and have ourselves a real talk. After all, I don't know you like my wife does. Honey, bring me a drink!"

Snort! SNOOORE...

“Ugh, geez, Dad, you’re so embarrassing...” Mitsuki stood with a disappointed expression, looking down at her father, who was now lying red-faced and asleep on the sofa, making a racket with his snoring.

“Hee hee, I’m sure your father must have gotten excited at the thought of getting a new son,” her mother said. “He drank much faster than usual, after all. Well, it could also be because he’s having to let go of his daughter, too, I suppose.”

Miyo smiled gently and chuckled to herself as she put a blanket over the top of Shigeru.

“You say that, but... do you really think he’s accepted me?” Yuuto asked a bit anxiously.

Miyo shrugged her shoulders at this. “We’ll see. He’s a bit of a *tsundere*, you know — not exactly honest with his feelings. He’ll never say a kind word to your face, Yuu-kun, but despite it all, I think he’s taken a liking to you.”

“I can only hope...”

“Hee hee! Well, I’ve been married to the man for almost twenty years now, so you can trust me on this.”

“All right. It’s just, how do I put this, it all happened so fast that it still doesn’t feel quite real... I said this to your husband earlier, but I was prepared for a long-term struggle.”

“Oh, my, that just means you think too little of yourself. I’ve told you this before, Yuu-kun: You’ve really grown into a fine young man in these past three years. I can tell that you must have gone through a lot of experiences; that depth comes out even just talking with you, like we are now. And as for this man here, he’s the chief of the human resources department at his company. There’s no way he hasn’t noticed the same thing.”

“Um, I’m humbled, ma’am.” Yuuto was a bit embarrassed at being so directly complimented to his face.

Still, though he felt humbled by the praise, he also recognized that he had

indeed grown as a person in the last three years, thanks to having overcome the many harsh struggles he'd been forced through.

He was honestly happy to have someone else recognize that in him, too.

Miyo looked at him with motherly kindness in her eyes, and said, "As you are now, I can be comfortable with leaving Mitsuki in your care. I know she's still young and inexperienced, but... please... take care of... her... okay?"

She struggled to finish her sentence as she began to cry.

She was trying to let go of her daughter, a girl who still had barely entered high school. Of course she would be sad. Of course it would make her feel lonely.

She kept saying she was comfortable with it, but of course she must also have a mountain of worries and fears. And she was swallowing those emotions in order to acknowledge Yuuto as worthy of being Mitsuki's partner for life.

Yuuto stood up straight and proper, and addressed her formally. "Yes, ma'am. I will treasure your daughter for the rest of our lives."

And within his heart, Yuuto swore that he would honor those words above all else, come what may.

ACT 2

“Well, there it is. The moon’s up now...” Mitsuki sighed, looking up wistfully at the full moon. At first only visible between the gaps of the densely packed trees, it had silently risen free of the canopy line and into the night sky.

As Mitsuki and Yuuto had continued their preparations, the days had seemed to fly by.

In the last half-month left to her, she had dutifully spent time with her parents, and had also spent as much time as possible having fun with Ruri and her other friends, so that she’d leave no regrets behind.

The previous night, her family and Ruri had thrown her a huge going-away party.

Even still, the fact that this might be her last time saying goodbye to all of them had left her feeling like it still wasn’t nearly enough to satisfy her.

If I had only done that differently back then... If I had only done that thing for that person when I could... I wish I could have gotten the chance to... Mitsuki’s mind filled with a mountain of things she was leaving undone, things she wouldn’t ever get the chance to try. Her vision was clouded with tears.

“Mitsuki, you make sure to take care of your health, okay?” Her mother spoke through tears of her own, and hugged her tightly.

Mitsuki thought about how this would be the last time she would feel this warmth, and the corners of her eyes grew hotter. She’d promised herself that she would say goodbye with a smile, and not break down crying, but the tears fell down her face anyway.

“Y-you too, Mom. I’m sorry... I’m sorry I wasn’t a better... daughter...”

“What are you talking about, honey? If you’re going to say that, then do this for me: Make sure you live a happy life over there. That’s... that’s the best thing a child can do for their parent.”

“Okay... okay...” Mitsuki nodded over and over, still sniffing.

They held each other for a long moment, and then finally, Miyo placed her

trembling hands on Mitsuki's shoulders and firmly pushed her away.

"It's not fair for me to hog you all to myself, now, is it?" Smiling through her tears, Miyo leaned over a bit to gesture to the man at her side.

Mitsuki's father Shigeru stood there, his teeth clenched tightly, his face scrunched up as if he was trying to hold himself back.

"Go on, dear, you too," Miyo prodded.

"R-right." Shigeru spoke in a trembling voice. "Ahh... um, well, you know, just... keep in touch with us as much as you can."

Mitsuki could see that his eyes were watery.

After getting a better impression of Yuuto as a person, her father had reluctantly acknowledged him as someone worthy of giving his daughter to, but there was no mistaking that he still couldn't bear to part with her.

Mitsuki could read those feelings from behind his words. She nodded deeply.

"Yes, I will. I'll call you every day, whenever that's possible."

"If you ever start to hate things over there, you can always come back to us right away, okay? I'm your father. I can figure out a way to make it happen."

"Thank you, Dad. But it's okay. I'm going to be happy."

"...Yeah, all right." Shigeru tilted his head up, trying to hold back his tears, and turned his back to her.

His shoulders were shaking. His pride as a father wouldn't allow him to let his daughter see him crying.

Mitsuki bowed deeply toward her father's back. "Thank you for taking care of me; thank you for everything. I was blessed to be born as your daughter, Dad. Please make sure to get along with Mom, okay?"

"D-don't talk down to your father like that! You're still just a child. Y-y-you just worry about taking care of yourself, that's all youuu... uuugh... augh..." At the end, Shigeru couldn't finish the sentence as his voice broke into sobs.

Teardrops were raining from Mitsuki's eyes, as well.

As she stood there, she felt a hand suddenly tap her on the shoulder.

“Mitsuki, good luck out there, and you be sure to live a good life!”

“Ruri-chan... Yeah, yeah! I definitely will!” Mitsuki looked at her best friend, who had come out here in the middle of the night just to see her off like this, and showed her the biggest smile she could muster.

Ruri’s face was covered in tears, too; she must have been pulled along by seeing Mitsuki’s mother and father break down crying. Even so, she flashed her characteristic mischievous grin, and gave Mitsuki a thumbs-up.

“When you have kids, make sure you send me pictures.”

“Whaaat?! Y-you’re getting ahead of yourself, Ruri-chan!”

“What are you saying?” Ruri grinned. “Yuuto-san’s like a king over there. If you’re gonna be his queen, having a baby right away to secure the next heir is one of your roles, right?”

“Y-Yggdrasil doesn’t do succession by bloodline, though...”

“Huh? Wait, really?” Ruri tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

Thinking back now, Mitsuki remembered Ruri had pretty much been distracted or asleep whenever there had been discussions of the finer details of Yggdrasil.

“Just you wait, Mitsuki,” Ruri said confidently. “I’m gonna get myself an awesome boyfriend, too, just as cool as your ‘Yuu-kun.’ I’ll send you pics when I do.”

“Ah ha ha! I’m looking forward to that.”

“Mitsuki, take care of yourself,” Ruri added, looking a bit choked up.

“Yeah, you too, Ruri-chan.” Mitsuki took a deep breath. “All right, then. I’ll be going now.”

She didn’t want to say farewell, but she managed to get the words out anyway, and reached down to pick up the backpack resting at her feet and put it on.

It was too big for her small frame, and looked like it might squash her underneath it at any moment. It was tightly packed with the full assortment of

items she'd purchased in preparation for this day.

Mitsuki gave one final bow to everyone, and turned to walk away.

Standing a ways ahead of her was Yuuto, who was looking in her direction with his face scrunched up and looking rather pained, as well. He was also wearing a large, heavy backpack.

Further ahead behind Yuuto stood his father, Tetsuhito. It seemed Yuuto had also finished saying his last goodbyes.

With heavy, slightly unsteady steps under the weighty pack, Mitsuki made her way over to Yuuto.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"...Are you really okay with this?" Yuuto said quietly, casting a glance at Mitsuki's family. "You can still back out, you know."

"No, I'm all right." Mitsuki wiped her eyes with her sleeve and made a brave face, forcing herself to look ahead.

Her gaze fell on the worn-down and partially rotted small Shinto shrine sitting ahead of them. Everything had started here three years ago, when they had come here during a game to test their courage.



They had both said their farewells. All that was left was to wait for the summoning ritual in Yggdrasil to begin, and then, when the timing was right, look into the divine mirror using an opposing mirror.

“Okay, then. I’ll tell them to start the ritual on their side.” Yuuto took out a new smartphone, and placed it to his ear.

It was a new model he’d just purchased a week ago. Supposedly it had the latest in LCD screens, and the battery life was an incredible improvement over earlier models.

They’d made sure to buy large-capacity solar-powered batteries, so their battery situation on the other side was sure to be drastically improved, but the fact remained that their power had a hard limit.

Yuuto had decided to buy the new, longer-lived phone thinking that it was better to have it than not, just in case of unforeseen events.

“Felicia? Is everything ready over there? ...Okay, then go ahead and get started.”

This was it.

In just a few moments Mitsuki would be leaving Japan, the land where she’d been born and raised — forever.

The instant that thought crossed her mind, anxiety suddenly began to well up within her.

Would she be able to bear not being able to see her parents ever again? Would she really be able to get by all right in this foreign land she’d never even seen, where she couldn’t understand the language?

She knew it was a little late to be getting scared, but she couldn’t help it.

But she couldn’t turn back, either.

“All right... Mitsuki.” Yuuto turned to her and held out his hand.

“Right!” With a spirited nod, Mitsuki grabbed hold of Yuuto’s hand, and looked up at the screen of the smartphone he was holding up.

The camera app was already active, and the frame was centered on Yuuto and

Mitsuki, their expressions stiff and nervous. Centered between them, the divine mirror was catching the moonlight and giving off an eerie glow.

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All of a sudden Mitsuki heard a woman's voice, beautiful and clear like a bell, seeming to echo from far away. It was a voice she'd heard several times before, in the background during her phone conversations with Yuuto.

Ohh, so this must be Felicia's voice, she thought. Then an image of a woman materialized in her mind.

Even as she continued to look at the image of herself and Yuuto on the smartphone screen in reality, it was as if she was simultaneously watching a different scene with her mind's eye. It was a very uncanny sensation.

The woman in her mind wore a finely worked golden tiara decorated in places with jewels, as well a pure-white outfit that reminded Mitsuki of an angel's robes. She was completely engrossed in performing some sort of dance.

"Wow, she's so pretty..." Mitsuki whispered, and let a breath escape that she didn't realize she had been holding.

She'd seen images of Felicia before, in pictures that Yuuto had sent her, but that was nothing compared to seeing her glamorous figure for real like this.

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The voice echoed in her mind again, much clearer than before.

Mitsuki's vision in the real world began to waver.

It seemed the summoning ritual *was* going to work.

They didn't actually have a clear understanding of the exact method for traveling from 21st century Japan to Yggdrasil, so they were trying to reproduce the same set of events that had led up to Yuuto's summoning last time as closely as possible.

The prospect of simply relying on that vague method had left Yuuto worried, arguing, "Then what do we do if that doesn't work?!" There was still the threat of the Lightning and Panther Clans, after all, and he was desperate to get to Yggdrasil as soon as possible.

Thankfully, it seemed like he wouldn't have to worry about that.

"Huh?!" Mitsuki cried out in surprise as she felt the sensation of Yuuto's hand in hers disappear.

She'd been gripping his hand tightly, determined not to let go no matter what, and yet it was as if they'd been separated in an instant. Like he'd just vanished.

"Yuu-kun...!" Panicked, Mitsuki turned to look in Yuuto's direction.

"Mitsuki!" Yuuto cried out her name, his face wracked with shock. His voice seemed somehow distant. His figure seemed blurry and faint.

Without even thinking, Mitsuki reflexively reached out toward him.

Yuuto reached out too, and grabbed her hand... and his hand slipped *right through hers*.

"Wha?! Mitsuki, your eyes...!"

Yuuto was saying something, but it was too faint to hear clearly. His figure blurred and grew dim...

...and Mitsuki's vision went dark.

When Mitsuki's sight returned, the first thing she saw was a familiar-looking mirror.

Its surface was carefully polished and held not a speck of rust, but otherwise its shape and appearance looked exactly the same as the divine mirror passed down through the generations of Mitsuki's family.

The mirror was enshrined on a rectangular altar surrounded by torches, along with what looked like clay idols.

Mitsuki sensed a group of people behind her, whispering to each other, and turned around to see a crowd of several dozen.

"Ah...!" Mitsuki couldn't help but gasp and tense up instinctively; it was a large group, and they were all clearly foreign, with chiseled features and blonde and brown hair. But they seemed just as surprised by her, perhaps even more so.

Wide-eyed, they all stared at her, then began looking around nervously. It was as if they were searching for someone.

“Ah, that’s right! What about Yuu-kun?!” Mitsuki also frantically began looking around, searching for the childhood friend who should have been summoned alongside her.

The room they were in was about the size of a small school gymnasium, but there was no sign of anyone with dark black hair.

Mitsuki looked down at the palm of her right hand.

Right up until the last moment, her hand had been joined with Yuuto’s. But now, it was empty.

That could only mean one thing.

“Did I... come here alone?” As the words left her mouth, Mitsuki could feel the blood draining from her face.

She had anticipated the possibility that just Yuuto would be summoned, or that it would fail and neither of them would be. But she hadn’t even considered the scenario of her being summoned alone.

“Wait, no, this can’t be...” Mitsuki began to panic. What was she even supposed to do, alone in a world where she couldn’t even communicate with anybody?

“Mitsuki こんにちは?” A woman called out to her, the same woman she had seen in her vision earlier — Felicia.

This was their first time meeting face-to-face, but she’d heard a lot about Felicia from Yuuto. Seeing someone she knew brought her back some small measure of composure.

“Ah, y-yes! Y-yes, that’s right. I’m Mitsuki. I am Mitsuki.” She repeated her own name, pointing to herself.

Felicia nodded to show she understood that, then responded with a question. “Yuuto ユウト?”

She was using the word “Yuuto,” so Mitsuki understood she had to be asking about what had happened to him.

That was also the question Mitsuki most wanted the answer to right now.

“Oh, that’s right!” Mitsuki gasped.

If she didn't know, she just needed to ask him herself. If she was next to this divine mirror, she could contact the world of modern Japan.

She was a little embarrassed that her panic had made it take her this long to remember that.

“Uh, let’s see, smartphone, smartphone...” She tried to reach down into her purse to retrieve it, but the huge backpack on her back made it so her arms just barely couldn’t reach it.

She went ahead and dropped the heavy pack, and picked up the purse again to look for the phone.

Taaaa! Ta la laaaa!

An old, familiar melody reached her ears. It was a song that had been popular a little over three years ago; she remembered that Yuuto had set it as his ringtone back then.

Mitsuki turned in the direction of the sound to see a girl with silver hair.

"Felicia," the silver-haired girl said.

She had a tough, gallant air about her. As she called Felicia's name, she held up an item that Mitsuki recognized right away.

It was a slightly older model of smartphone, the one Yuuto had been using three years ago. Its screen was a bit small for its size, and it was a bit thicker than the phones she was used to seeing nowadays.

“𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅𐄆𐄇𐄈?” Felicia ran over to the silver-haired girl and took the phone, placing it to her ear. She cried out in words Mitsuki didn’t understand. The person on the other end must be Yuuto.

Mitsuki could easily tell how worried Felicia must be from her tone, even without understanding the words themselves.

That was probably only natural. Yuuto was the person the Wolf Clan was so desperate to reclaim, yet here they'd failed to summon the man himself, and

only gotten his extra passenger. Of course they'd be confused.

Mitsuki herself felt much the same way, filled with dread at what would happen now.

Her anxiety was made even worse by the strange stares she felt from the crowd, and their voices in a language that didn't make any sense to her.

"Mitsuki ነፍሳህህሆህሆህ." Felicia turned to Mitsuki, who had been nervously watching her speak with Yuuto, and held out the smartphone to her.

Without thinking, Mitsuki yanked it out of her hands.

"Yuu-kun?!" she cried.

"Hey, is that Mitsuki? Yeah, it's me. I don't know why, but it looks like you're the only one who got summoned."

Yuuto responded to her in a much calmer voice than her own. Maybe that was because he'd had a chance to talk with Felicia first and get a handle on the situation.

"It might be that Felicia only has enough magic power to summon one person at a time. She's gonna perform the Gleipnir ritual again for us, so just sit tight for a bit, okay?"

"O-okay." Mitsuki nodded, and exhaled in relief.

The thought of being all alone in this foreign world was terrifying.

At the very least, they now knew that performing the Gleipnir ritual like this *did* work for bringing someone from modern Japan to Yggdrasil.

In that case, one could assume that summoning Yuuto next would be an easy task...

"Oh, that's right, tonight is the full moon."

Standing out on his terrace, the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr looked up at the sky and remarked aloud to himself, as if he'd only just remembered.

The moonlight illuminating his face glistened off of the jet-black mask which covered the upper half of it. That strange mask of his had earned him the alias of Grímnir, the Masked Lord among the people in the region, a name by which

he was widely feared.

Dealing with the aftermath of the great Battle of Gashina had kept him incredibly busy for the past half-month, so much so that he had even lost track of the calendar date.

“Sigyn!” Hveðrungr called to his wife, who had been standing in waiting nearby. His gaze and his tone were cold, much colder than one might expect of a husband calling out to his wife.

This woman had praised him and spoken up for him when he had still been but a stranger to her and her clan, and after helping his rise to power, she had been devoted to him; he surely owed her an extraordinary debt for that.

However, this woman had also used her power to expel from this world the man Hveðrungr had vowed over and over that he would kill with his own two hands. Now he was in a place out of reach.

Her action seemed like a declaration that Hveðrungr was *no match* for Yuuto. His wife, of all people, had done this. He couldn’t forgive her for it.

Frankly, he could cut her to ribbons and still not be satisfied, but she was also the previous ruler of this clan, and the one who had publicly named him as her successor. If he did as he wished, he knew he would lose his power to unify the Panther Clan under his rule.

That being said, he was in no mood to share a bed with this woman anymore. So their relationship had grown cold and fallen irreparably apart.

“What is it, Rungr?” Sigyn’s reply was also wooden.

As always, her revealing outfit hid none of the beauty of her brown skin or sultry form, but her usual sensual grace was snuffed out by her dark expression.

“What are the chances that Yuuto might return to this world tonight?” Hveðrungr demanded. “Is it really impossible?”

It was true that, two years ago, Yuuto had wanted only to return to his homeland. But people changed.

Yuuto was now one of the great rulers of western Yggdrasil, and had obtained great wealth and power. His coffers were filled with gold, silver, and treasures;

he had the privilege of taking his pick of beautiful women to serve at his pleasure every night; and everyone beneath him knelt at his feet and followed his orders.

Having become a man living life at the top, a life that others could only dream of, it seemed impossible to consider that Yuuto would so easily throw that away.

And the Wolf Clan, for their part, surely desired ever more of the knowledge that he could provide to them, for it had brought them such glory and prosperity.

So then, with tonight being the full moon, his little sister Felicia might very well be in the middle of performing the summoning ritual once again.

“Not a chance.” Sigyn responded bluntly and firmly, striking down Hveðrungr’s thin hope as if cutting a thread. “I heard from the imperial priest Alexis about the Wolf Clan’s seiðr user, and about how much power she has. It’s less than yours. I am the Witch of Miðgarðr, and I poured my life and soul into my casting of Fimbulvetr — she will never be able to overcome it.”

ACT 3

“So... it wasn’t a dream...” Lying on a hard bed, Mitsuki looked up at the unfamiliar yellow-brown ceiling above her, and gave a long sigh.

Last night, they had performed the Gleipnir ritual two more times, but still failed to summon Yuuto.

Felicia had fainted as she was finishing the spell incantation during the third try; she must surely have used up every ounce of her mental strength. At that point there had been no choice but to call things off for the night.

After that, Mitsuki had managed to exchange a few words with Yuuto and her parents, but she didn't really remember it too well. The shock of the situation had put a fog over her mind.

The part she clearly did remember was being told that the next summoning would need to take place during the next full moon — in other words, almost a month from now.

And furthermore, there was no real guarantee that Yuuto would be able to make it to Yggdrasil even then.

Actually, going by the results they'd gotten this time, it was easier to assume the chances of summoning him successfully were rather low.

There had to be some sort of cause, some factor preventing them from summoning Yuuto. Until they took care of whatever that was, Mitsuki was going to be staying in Yggdrasil alone.

There was a chance she might even be alone here until the day she died...

Her whole body began to shiver, and she felt her teeth chattering. She felt tears falling down her face, one after the other.

"Mitsuki ነጋነሽህ።" A voice called to her from outside the entrance to her room.

“Ah... y-yes?” Mitsuki hurriedly wiped her tears and replied as best she could.

If nothing else, she was the woman betrothed to the patriarch of the Wolf

Clan. If she let herself be seen sobbing pathetically on her very first day here, it would bring shame to Yuuto.

“𐄂𐄂 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂.” With those unintelligible words, Felicia entered the room.

Seeing her this up close, Mitsuki once again found herself in awe of how beautiful she was.

With someone like this always pushing for his affection, it was a wonder that Yuuto had been able to keep in control of himself all this time. Mitsuki was a girl, and even she felt a little lightheaded in the woman’s alluring presence.

“𐄂𐄂𐄂 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂.” Felicia addressed her with a smile, but of course Mitsuki had no idea what she was saying.

It gave her a real sense of how hard it must have been for Yuuto three years ago. It was something she had *known* about already, but now that she was experiencing it firsthand, she had to admit that it was far worse than she’d ever imagined.

Even the most basic of basic communication was a painstaking task, and the stress from that was no joke.

Mitsuki found herself at a loss, wondering if she’d really be able to carry on like this... and then her thoughts were interrupted by the melody of a lovely song.

“Huh?” Mitsuki looked up to see Felicia smiling brightly down at her.

“Big Sister Mitsuki, can you understand my words?”

“Wha? Whoaaa!” Mitsuki couldn’t stop herself from shouting in delighted surprise. “Y-yes, I can, I can! What is this? It feels so strange!”

The words she was hearing with her actual ears were still a string of meaningless syllables. And yet, she could still understand what they *meant*.

Mitsuki found herself growing excited as she experienced this mysterious new sensation. This had to be a “galdr,” that song magic she had heard about! Which meant this spell was “Connections,” which enabled communication between people of disparate languages.

“That is wonderful to hear,” said Felicia. “Please allow me to formally

introduce myself to you. I am Felicia, and I serve as Big Brother Yuuto's assistant and military adjutant."

Smiling softly, Felicia introduced herself with ladylike grace.

Mitsuki suddenly felt terribly childish at having let herself get carried away in her excitement. She hurriedly straightened herself up and bowed politely to Felicia.

"M-my name is Mitsuki Shimoya. I've known Yuuto since we were both really little, and, um... um, now, w-we're going to be getting married..."

"Yes, I know. After three years, you were finally supposed to be together with him, and yet once again, I have caused you to be apart. It is inexcusable, and I am truly sorry." Felicia bowed her head deeply, her shoulders trembling. It was clear that she felt a deep personal shame.

Mitsuki felt averse to interrogating Felicia in this state, but there were still questions she had to ask. "Um, does it seem like Yuu-kun will be able to make it over here?"

Last night, Felicia had collapsed, so Mitsuki hadn't yet gotten the chance to ask why the summoning ritual had failed.

"I have come to you this morning in order to discuss exactly that issue," Felicia said. "Please, if you will come with me..."

"Big Sister Mitsuki, this way, please," Felicia directed.

"R-right."

Mitsuki was led into a room, and the instant she set foot through the doorway, the intense glares of dozens of people all locked onto her at once, and she reflexively shrank back with an, "Eek!"

Everyone in the room had hard, grizzled faces, and sharp, piercing eyes. The pressure was so intense that she was grateful she had taken a trip to the bathroom beforehand.

There were a few young women in the room too, but all of them also had a tense, powerful air about them.

Oh... oh... sh-should I introduce myself to them, or say some sort of greeting?

But... but I'm so scared that I can't even talk!

She felt like she'd just walked into a scene from a Yakuza movie, where the hardened leaders of the organization sat around a table in council. As just an ordinary person, she was completely out of her element.

As she stood there, overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the room and frozen in place, the room filled with the sound of clattering chairs as everyone stood up.

Eek! Did I do something wrong? What did I do?! Mitsuki shrank back and covered her face with her arms.

"Good morning to you, Mother!" A chorus of hearty voices greeted her, and then everyone bowed deeply to her.

"Eh? Whaat?!" Mitsuki was left stunned, blinking in confusion. She couldn't understand what was happening.

"Thank you very much for coming to see us." A large, bear-like man in the back of the room addressed Mitsuki with incredibly polite language. "As things were so confused last night, I was unable to make a proper introduction, so please allow me now to welcome you on behalf of our clan. I am Jörgen, Lord Yuuto's sworn son, and the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan. It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The second-in-command was the highest-ranked clan officer, treated as the "eldest child" in terms of the clan's family power dynamic. And with Yuuto currently absent, he also would shoulder all of the authority and responsibility of the patriarch.

As expected of someone with such an important role, the man had an intensity to his presence above and beyond the other people gathered in the room.

Mitsuki was temporarily rendered breathless, but she finally snapped out of it and straightened her posture before replying.

"Um, um, I'm M-Mitsuki Shimoya. L-likewise, I'm pleased to meet you, and I hope we get along well." She quickly bowed her head several times as she stammered out her introduction.

She worried that acting too timidly might cause the others to look down on her, but she was just a normal Japanese girl, and this was how her body reacted reflexively to the situation, and it was too late to do anything about that.

“If you would, Mother, your seat is right here,” Jörgen explained, indicating the seat next to his.

“Ah, um, yes.” Mitsuki nodded, once again reflexively. But she winced as she took a good look at the seat.

Mitsuki’s place at the table was very obviously different from everyone else’s. It was the only chair with armrests, and it had a soft-looking red cushion and drapings. It looked just like a throne.

And, of course, it was right next to Jörgen, the fiercest-faced man in the room.

What kind of torture is this? Mitsuki wondered, but she didn’t have the courage to speak up and ask for a different seat.

She gave up, and forcing herself to carry herself as tall as possible, tried her best to make her way gracefully to her seat.

As Mitsuki made her way to her place at the table, she could sense the nearby men tensing up as she passed by them.

It seemed these people were all just as nervous as she was. That thought made it just a little bit easier on her.

But though she managed to make it to her seat, everyone in the room remained standing up.

She didn’t want to just rudely sit down by herself, so she waited, watching the room for some kind of sign.

Felicia, who had been following closely behind her, subtly whispered into her ear, “Please have a seat, Big Sister Mitsuki.”

“Huh? But I can’t do that if everyone else is standing. It wouldn’t be right.”

“On the contrary, Big Sister; you are the person of highest status here. How could those of us beneath you sit while you are still standing?”

“Ohhh, but...” Mitsuki whimpered nervously. “A-all right, I understand.”

I have to do it. This is their custom, she told herself, and though it was difficult, she forced herself to sit down first.

However, even after she did so, no one else showed any signs of moving to sit.

Wait, what's going on? Did I make some kind of mistake? Inwardly, she began fearing the worst.

"Big Sister, please give everyone the order to sit," Felicia whispered.

Another whisper in her ear, and once more, it was giving her an incredibly difficult task.

She was a young girl who'd only just turned sixteen, surrounded by a room full of adults with fierce faces and commanding auras, and she was supposed to order these people around? "Unreasonable" would be an understatement.

Honestly, she wanted to ask if she could get out of having to do it, but if she *didn't* go through with it, nobody else was going to be able to sit down. She would certainly feel guilty about making everyone stay standing through the whole meeting.

Mitsuki resigned herself to the task and timidly spoke up. "E-everyone, please take your seats."

She kept her voice soft and her tone polite, doing her best to try to avoid making the order sound high-handed.

But despite that, everyone replied with a powerful, spirited, "Yes, ma'am!!" and sat down quickly.

Yuu-kun, just how much do these people worship you? she wondered. They were responding like this even to her, his fiancée.

She had already known that Yuuto's status as patriarch was something like being a king, but she'd never imagined he was the object of this much absolute loyalty and devotion.

I see. This must be the kind of treatment the son of a CEO gets from the company employees, she found herself thinking offhandedly. *I bet that's why those kinds of people end up thinking they're just as important, and start acting*

all high and mighty.

Fortunately, Mitsuki's parents hadn't raised a fool. She knew these people weren't showing her this respect because of anything she herself had done.

She understood that it wasn't respect for her, really: When they looked at her, they saw Yuuto, whom she represented, as if he were standing behind her. They were being deferential toward him.



“Jörgen, I will leave the rest to you,” Mitsuki said politely. “Please don’t mind me and proceed with the meeting.”

After that one polite command, she was silent. She had only just arrived, and didn’t know anything about how things worked here.

She had a ton of questions she wanted to ask about Yuuto, but she desperately did her best to suppress her impatient feelings. It wouldn’t be good for her to butt in and take over the discussion right now.

One could say that Mitsuki’s judgment here was the fruit of her preparations before coming to Yggdrasil. Once she had committed to marrying Yuuto — and, therefore, becoming the wife of a clan patriarch — she had researched various famous (and infamous) wives of Japanese and Chinese history, to serve as examples.

“Thank you,” said Jörgen. “In that case, I would like to begin this council meeting. My sincere thanks to all present for gathering so early in the morning.”

He stood from his chair and, having addressed the room of seated members, bowed to them once.

“I am sure everyone here wants to know the same thing... Aunt Felicia. As the one who performed the rite, I would like for you to give us your account of what happened last night.”

“Right.” Felicia stood up.

Everyone’s eyes locked onto her. Few of those gazes were friendly or supportive; in fact, it seemed as if the majority were looking at her with blame in their eyes.

In the midst of all those criticizing stares, Felicia stated her case firmly. “In regard to the summoning rite itself, I believe that all of the steps were performed without mistake or oversight, and that it was not the issue. Big Sister Mitsuki being summoned here is proof positive of that.”

Several of the seated clan members furrowed their brows, and their gazes grew harder.

As if to speak on their behalf, an elderly-looking man with white hair spat, “So there was no fault on your part, is that what you’re trying to say? But the fact of the matter is, you weren’t able to summon Lord Yuuto!”

“Great-Uncle Bruno, please,” Jörgen intervened. “I think it might be difficult for Aunt Felicia to speak freely if you are so confrontational with her.”

But the sharp-tongued man called Bruno did not back down. “You’re too soft, second-in-command! This woman doesn’t understand just how serious this is. After the huge defeat at Gashina, and with Lord Yuuto being nowhere to be seen, anxiety is spreading among the soldiers and citizens alike. The Panther and Lightning Clans have forged an alliance with the Oath of the Sibling Chalice. You know just how dangerous it will be for Lord Yuuto to remain absent for much longer...”

“Heh.” Jörgen smirked.

“You think this is funny?!”

“Ah, no, no, forgive my rudeness, great-uncle,” Jörgen said quickly. “It’s just that, hearing those words from you when you were once so opposed to allowing Father to assume the position of patriarch... things sure have a way of changing with time.”

“Why are you dragging that up *now*?!” Bruno snapped at him. “And even back then, I was acting in what I believed was the best interest of the Wolf Clan... Right now, I see him as the central pillar of the Wolf Clan, someone we cannot do without!”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Jörgen. “That is all the more reason why we cannot afford another failure, and so we should stay calm and let Aunt Felicia speak. Otherwise, we’ll have nothing to base our plans on.”

“Grr...! Fine.” Bruno growled and made a face as bitter as if he’d swallowed a bug, then reluctantly nodded.

Mitsuki got the sense that Bruno had been speaking the truth, at least from his perspective. Perhaps even that man was being tormented by feelings of anxiety and unease.

And judging by the number of sharp looks directed at Felicia, he likely wasn’t

alone. It was potentially true of many of the people here.

The situation here might be far graver than Mitsuki had originally thought.

After confirming that things had settled down, Felicia spoke up again. "Is it all right if I continue?"

"Yes, go ahead." Jörgen motioned for her to do so.

Felicia nodded. "There is something I noticed during the first performance of the rite, that I thought might just be a misunderstanding on my part, but during the second and third attempts, I felt it much more clearly."

"Hmm, go on."

"When I cast Gleipnir, I definitely felt it grasp onto something. However, in the next instant, it was repelled, and then dissolved as if canceled out."

"You mean that someone else was interfering with it, then?"

"Yes. I think it is Sigyn's Fimbulvetr, which undid my previous Gleipnir. I believe the effects of that spell might still be active."

Jörgen clicked his tongue in irritation. "Tch. I see. So that's what it is." He practically spat out the words in disgust. "In other words, even if we perform the summoning rite at the next full moon, it's most likely that it will be blocked again by Fimbulvetr and fail. Is that right?"

"...Yes, unfortunately. My power as a user of seiðr is far, far lower than Sigyn's. Last night only further served to make me painfully aware of that great difference in power between us. I do not think it possible for me to break through the power of her spell."

"You 'do not think it possible'?" Bruno exploded. "Don't give us that! How can you speak of this so lightly?! You *have* to do it! If the enemy's spell is blocking you, then show some willpower and break through it!"

Once again Bruno pelted Felicia with angry shouts, his voice roaring.

A few of the other Wolf Clan officers shouted too, following Bruno's lead.

"Y-yeah, that's right!"

"You can't get away with just saying you can't do it! The fate of the Wolf Clan

itself is riding on this!”

It was true that even now, the military threat from the Panther and Lightning Clans was pressing in upon them. At this late stage, perhaps they simply couldn't allow themselves to accept Felicia's word that she was unable to summon Yuuto.

Suddenly, a cold voice cut through the din like a knife.

“If you understand how serious this is and you're only going to go on about foolish things like ‘willpower’ and ‘determination,’ then shut that mouth of yours. You're wasting our time.”

It was Sigrún.

Her remarks toward her sworn great-uncle were so unmistakably insulting that it instantly brought a hush over the room.

“You little...! You dare speak that way to me, *girl*?!” Bruno's face twisted with indignation as he began to berate her, but Sigrún shot right back at him.

“Oh, shut *up*! You know there's no way Felicia wouldn't have done everything in her power! Did you not see for yourself last night how she kept going until she collapsed?!”

Of course, now that Bruno had been spoken to so disrespectfully by a girl beneath him in station, he could not back down, lest he lose face.

They glared at each other, and sparks seemed to fly between them.

“R-Rún, I'm happy you want to stand up for me, but...” Felicia said nervously.

“Yes, that was far too rude a way to act toward your great-uncle, Sigrún,” Jörgen cut in. “Apologize.”

Neither of them seemed to want to allow this conflict to continue.

The reason why only Sigrún was being reprimanded was that, according to the official customs of the clan, Bruno held a much higher status than her within the “family tree,” as her great-uncle.

The majority of the people in the meeting room were glaring at Sigrún reproachfully.

However, there were exceptions.

“I happen to agree with Big Sister Sigrún’s opinion.” A small young girl, her appearance at odds with this gathering of fierce-looking clan officers, scoffed. “By careful calculation and preparation, one wins the battle by design. That is how my birth father Botvid operates, and it is Father’s ideal, as well. Demanding that one simply make do with willpower is the statement of a fool.”

“How dare you speak that way!” Bruno roared. “You might be the daughter by birth of the Claw Clan patriarch, but here you are nothing more than a low-ranked newcomer!”

“I would say much the same to you, someone who is far from Father’s loyal subordinate,” Kristina sneered. “After all this time, you still haven’t even exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with him in any capacity. As a dead offshoot branch of this family, please refrain from interrupting us every few seconds, if you can. It really slows down our discussion.”

“Whaat?!” This seemed to be too much for Bruno, and he glared at Kristina with indignation, but she just smiled coolly back at him and said nothing.

Standing next to her, Albertina stood with both hands over her mouth, glancing worriedly back and forth between the two of them as they glared at each other.

Wow, this is getting really nasty, Mitsuki thought. If Yuuto doesn’t get here soon, there really might be some kind of internal split in the clan.

It was harrowing to watch, but she could do nothing but watch quietly and see where things went from here.

She’d heard the saying “Get three people together and you’ll get a factional split” before, and what she’d seen so far today told her that the Wolf Clan was certainly not a monolithic organization.

On the other hand, she could feel the same absolute loyalty to Yuuto from everyone here right now.

Perhaps Yuuto’s presence had been so large and influential that it had held everyone together until now.

“Ahem.” Jörgen cleared his throat and turned to Felicia, resetting the discussion. “A-anyway, let us continue. Aunt Felicia.”

His behavior was just what one would expect from an organization’s second-in-command.

“I have no reason to doubt that you used every extent of your abilities last night,” Jörgen continued. “However, the Wolf Clan’s current situation means that failure will not be an excuse for you, or for us. Is there nothing we can do about this?”

“As I explained a few moments ago, the gulf in power between Sigyn and myself is too vast. I would be prepared to sacrifice even my life if it would make a difference. However...”

Felicia bit her lower lip, clearly frustrated beyond words. Her shoulders and her clenched fists were trembling.

Everyone knew that this woman was Yuuto’s most trusted friend and advisor. And Mitsuki had the impression, though this was still only a guess on her part, that Felicia also loved Yuuto romantically.

Bruno had scolded Felicia and questioned her willpower, but the truth was that out of everyone here, the one who had most wanted the summoning to succeed, and the one who was most angry at Felicia for the failure, was probably Felicia herself.

“Hey, uh, I’m not really gonna get any of the complicated stuff about the condition of the Wolf Clan, but...” A red-haired girl at the table spoke hesitantly, scratching the back of her head. “Does this mean if we can get our hands on a seiðr user as strong as Sigyn, we can get Yuuto back?”

Mitsuki hadn’t been introduced to the red-haired girl yet, but she’d seen the girl’s face in some of the pictures Yuuto had sent her.

This was Ingrid, whom Yuuto had worked together with to create a variety of weapons and tools for the clan. She was known as the Birther of Blades, Ívaldi, after her rune of the same name.

Felicia’s face did not brighten at hearing Ingrid’s suggestion. “It is theoretically possible. However, those who can use seiðr magic are already rare to begin

with. If we are talking about those equal to or stronger than Sigyn, then...”

“You could search all of Yggdrasil and find fewer of them than you could count on one hand,” finished Kristina. “And in this local region, I do not think we would find any at all.”

Kristina was the girl in charge of the Wolf Clan’s intelligence gathering. Furthermore, she had already done research on prominent users of seiðr before, at Yuuto’s request. Young girl though she might be, her words carried a considerable persuasive weight.

“Yes, that’s true,” Felicia said quietly. “The only one I can think of offhand is...”

She stared at Mitsuki.

Mitsuki had been outside of the conversation as a mere observer this whole time, so the sudden attention surprised her a bit.

Naturally, Mitsuki couldn’t use any magic, seiðr or otherwise. So then, why was Felicia staring at her? After a moment, Mitsuki hit on the answer.

“Oh, right, Rífa!” Mitsuki clapped her hands, recalling the girl who supposedly had the exact same face as her own.

In this world, runes and their power were proof of being chosen by the gods as Einherjar, and Rífa held not one but two runes. There were said to be only two people in all of Yggdrasil with two runes, and on top of that, Rífa was specifically a rare seiðr user of unmatched skill and power.

The other holder of twin runes, the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr, was supposedly a man of ridiculous strength. He had been surrounded and attacked by seven other Einherjar and fought them all off by himself. That was just how powerful twin runes were. One would think that Rífa would surely have no trouble breaking an enemy spell, even one cast by Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr.

“Lady Rífa? What is important about Lady Rífa?” Jörgen asked, not understanding why the name had suddenly come up.

That was because Rífa’s abilities and identity had been kept top secret in order to avoid the confusion it would cause if she were found out. Only a select

few knew the truth.

Kristina sighed, then spoke up. “Father forbade us from saying anything, but I suppose it’s fine, now. Rífa is nothing more than an alias she used, based on a beloved nickname. Her real name is Sigrdrífa.”

“What?!” Jörgen shouted, along with many others in the room, and there were several audible gasps.

Every person in Yggdrasil knew the name Sigrdrífa.

“Y-you mean, H-Her Imperial Majesty, Þjóðann Sigrdrífa?! You mean that was *her*?!” Jörgen’s shout was practically a scream.

“Precisely.” Kristina nodded slowly.

The excited murmurs in the crowded room grew even more numerous.

Mitsuki knew that it was hard to blame them for their shock at the revelation. After all, she’d gotten an earful of complaints from Yuuto about the girl’s behavior on more than one occasion.

That socially uncouth troublemaker of a “princess” was actually the divine empress, the person who held the position of greatest authority and historical dignity in all of Yggdrasil. Hearing something like that, it would be harder *not* to be surprised.

“Why did you keep that a secret?!” Jörgen screamed. “...No, right, it was on Father’s orders.”

“Yes, so I ask your forgiveness.”

“Rrgh... then it’s fine,” Jörgen muttered. “I can guess the overall reasons for it. If one wished to conquer the lands of Yggdrasil, then capturing Her Majesty would be the fastest and most direct method to advance that goal. Surely there would be those who would come forward suggesting that, if her identity were known. And at the same time, such a thing could easily become the trigger that ignites war. For someone as averse to conflict as Father, he would have wanted to keep things peaceful and uncomplicated.”

“It is exactly as you surmised,” Kristina said.

“Then if so, why would you bring her up...? Wait... the twin runes?!”

Understanding spread across Jörgen's face.

It was widely known in Yggdrasil that the twin runes of the þjóðann were contained in both eyes, and were passed down hereditarily from generation to generation.

It would be no exaggeration to say that that unique, divine quality was a reason the þjóðann was treated as akin to a living god by the people.

Kristina nodded. "Yes, her power is indeed befitting of the reputation of the twin-rune Einherjar. She can even cast her seiðr magics in an abbreviated form, cutting out the incantations, magic circles or holy dances. Her powers are quite absurd."

"That's...! I see... if it were someone that powerful, she could break through Sigyn's spell. But..." At first Jörgen's voice was excited, but it lost its energy as he spoke, and eventually he trailed off into silence.

"Indeed," Kristina confirmed. "It seems that Father's lack of ambition has once again come back to haunt us. If he had made her stay here with us, this would have been so much simpler..."

"How right you are."

Jörgen and Kristina both gave deep sighs.

"Um, is having her come visit here again not an option, or something?" Mitsuki asked the two of them the first plausible question that came to mind.

Their conversation thus far seemed to be suggesting that it probably wasn't possible, but she wanted to be sure. Up until now, there had been a lot in their conversation that had gone unsaid, due to their shared knowledge of details.

Jörgen frowned deeply, grunting to himself before he turned to Mitsuki to reply.

"Truthfully, yes. I must admit that getting the þjóðann to visit us again would be incredibly difficult to do. She is far, far above us in terms of social station, you see. It would be possible for one of the patriarchs of the clans directly subordinate to her, perhaps."

"Oh... but, I mean, you were her host, and took care of her needs, and earned

her friendship, right? Then...”

“Even if, in theory, Her Majesty herself were willing to come, her advisor vassals would absolutely never allow it. She could not be allowed to answer the direct invitation of a lowly provincial clan lord... no, not even the invitation of the patriarch himself, but the substitute acting in his absence. If she did so, it would dirty the dignity and reputation of the position of þjóðann.”

“Oh. It sounds like this sort of thing is really difficult.”

Political affairs like this were still a bit hard for Mitsuki to understand. But from what Jörgen was saying, she could tell that it really would be incredibly difficult, pretty much impossible, to pull off.

The meeting continued on throughout the day until sunset, but there were no other good suggestions, and eventually it was called to a close.



“I wonder how Mitsuki’s doing,” Yuuto mumbled to himself listlessly. “I hope she isn’t crying right now...”

He was lying on his bed with his arms and legs splayed out, looking up at his room’s ceiling — a ceiling that yesterday he had been sure he wouldn’t see again.

The aftermath of the failed summoning had really been a mess.

He had thought of and prepared for the possibility that the summoning to Yggdrasil would fail for both of them, and that they’d have to face the very unamused faces of the family that had come to give them such an emotional sendoff. What he hadn’t thought of at all was the possibility that it would be successful just for Mitsuki, and fail for him, and that he’d have to console and reassure her desperately worried parents.

At least he’d been able to confirm Mitsuki’s safety over the phone, and he’d made sure to tell his subordinates to take responsibility for watching over her in the meantime. He’d also asserted to everyone that, next month, he’d make it to Yggdrasil without fail, and that had let him save his skin for now, but of course they hadn’t fully believed that or accepted him at his word.

Yuuto sighed. “I wish it would hurry up and get dark sooner...”

It was so frustrating that he couldn’t get in contact with Yggdrasil unless the moon was out. He wanted to know what was going on in Yggdrasil right now so badly.

Every minute, every second, felt incredibly long to him.

Feelings of anxiety and restlessness swirled within him.

“I made that promise to Mitsuki’s parents and all, but am I really gonna be able to make it next time?”

Felicia had collapsed from exhaustion the previous night, and so he hadn’t had any chance to get any good details about what happened.

Three attempts, three failures. Was there some sort of fatal flaw in their methods? Were they just going to fail again come the next full moon? No, not just next month, but forever afterward?

“Auugh, dammit! If I stay here in my room, I end up thinking these stupid thoughts! I should get up and go for a walk... hm?”

Taaaa! Ta la la! ♪ The new model of smartphone resting next to Yuuto’s pillow began ringing just as he was starting to hoist himself out of bed.

Because it was a new phone, he’d only given the number to a very select few people so far.

His father Tetsuhito was living in the same house, so he would have just yelled directly up to him instead of calling on the phone.

That meant it should be Mitsuki’s family. But as Yuuto looked at the screen, he saw no registered name displayed — just a long string of numbers.

“I wonder who it is?” He picked up. “...Hello?”

He paused. “Wha— Saya-san?!”

When Yuuto arrived at the diner they’d arranged to meet at, Saya was already at a seat by the window, waving to him. “Oh! Hey, over here!”

It was the middle of the day, so there were plenty of other people, but there were also quite a few unoccupied seats, too. This place was out in the sticks,

after all.

Yuuto casually waved back at Saya and made his way over to her.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“No worries, I just got here myself. Actually, I’m sorry for making you come out here when things must be pretty busy for you.”

“No, my previous plans went up in smoke, so I was free.” Yuuto drooped his shoulders and gave a bitter grin as he sat in the seat across from Saya.

The waitress came by, and once they’d ordered lunch and drinks, Saya skipped the small talk and immediately got down to business.

“Today I heard from Ruri that Mitsuki-chan went to Yggdrasil. Is that true?”

“Yes... For some reason, I wasn’t able to go, though.”

“Uughhh, give me a break. Why did this have to happen without me knowing...” Saya moaned with frustration and put a hand over her forehead, as if resentful of herself.

Yuuto had been assuming that Ruri had already told Saya about the plan much earlier, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

Of course, this was someone who had helped him out. He should have taken it upon himself to tell her directly in the first place; that would have been the proper thing to do. He had been so preoccupied with persuading Mitsuki’s parents — her father, really — to let the two of them go, that he’d forgotten to let Saya know what they were trying to do.

That was clearly on him.

“I apologize,” Yuuto said. “Things were a little hectic, and I forgot to tell you about it.”

“Forgetting to tell me isn’t the problem here. Look, weren’t you always trying to make it back to this side, all that time? Why is it that you’re now up and going back to Yggdrasil? And bringing Mitsuki-chan with you, to boot?”

“The Wolf Clan army I left behind suffered a huge military loss to the armies of the Panther and Lightning Clans, and it looks like if I don’t return to them,

things are going to get really, really bad. And Mitsuki, well, she said... she said she was gonna come with me.” Yuuto scratched his cheek bashfully with a finger.

Agreeing to journey across time and space to go to some far-off land to be with him wasn’t something just a childhood friend would do. In other words, stating that fact might as well be the same as stating out loud what their relationship had become.

It was naturally a little embarrassing to talk about that with someone he didn’t know too well.

“Geez, unbelievable! I figured if you were both going to stay in Japan, I wouldn’t need to tell you about it, but then that came back to bite me! And Mitsuki-chan’s already gone back to Yggdrasil! Oh, this is the *worst!*” In frustration, Saya ran her fingers roughly through her pretty, neatly-combed blond hair, not seeming to care how unruly she was making it.

Something was clearly up.

With growing unease, Yuuto couldn’t help but recall the conversation he’d had with Saya many days ago.

Back then, it had looked like she’d realized something about Yggdrasil.

This thing she hadn’t told him had to be related to that realization, somehow. And unmistakably, Yuuto had no difficulty imagining that whatever it was, it was an ill omen for him, or rather for the Wolf Clan.

He couldn’t let it go; he had to ask what it was.

“...Was there something you found out about Yggdrasil?” he asked, and looked Saya straight in the eyes.

Yuuto’s face had changed from that of a mere young man to the face of a young lord, ruler of his own clan and defender of the sister clans under his protection, with the weight of hundreds of thousands of lives resting on his shoulders.

“Yes, I found it, all right. I discovered what Yggdrasil really is.”

“R-really?!”

“If things were going to turn out this way, I should have told you sooner. So that it would keep you from going back.”

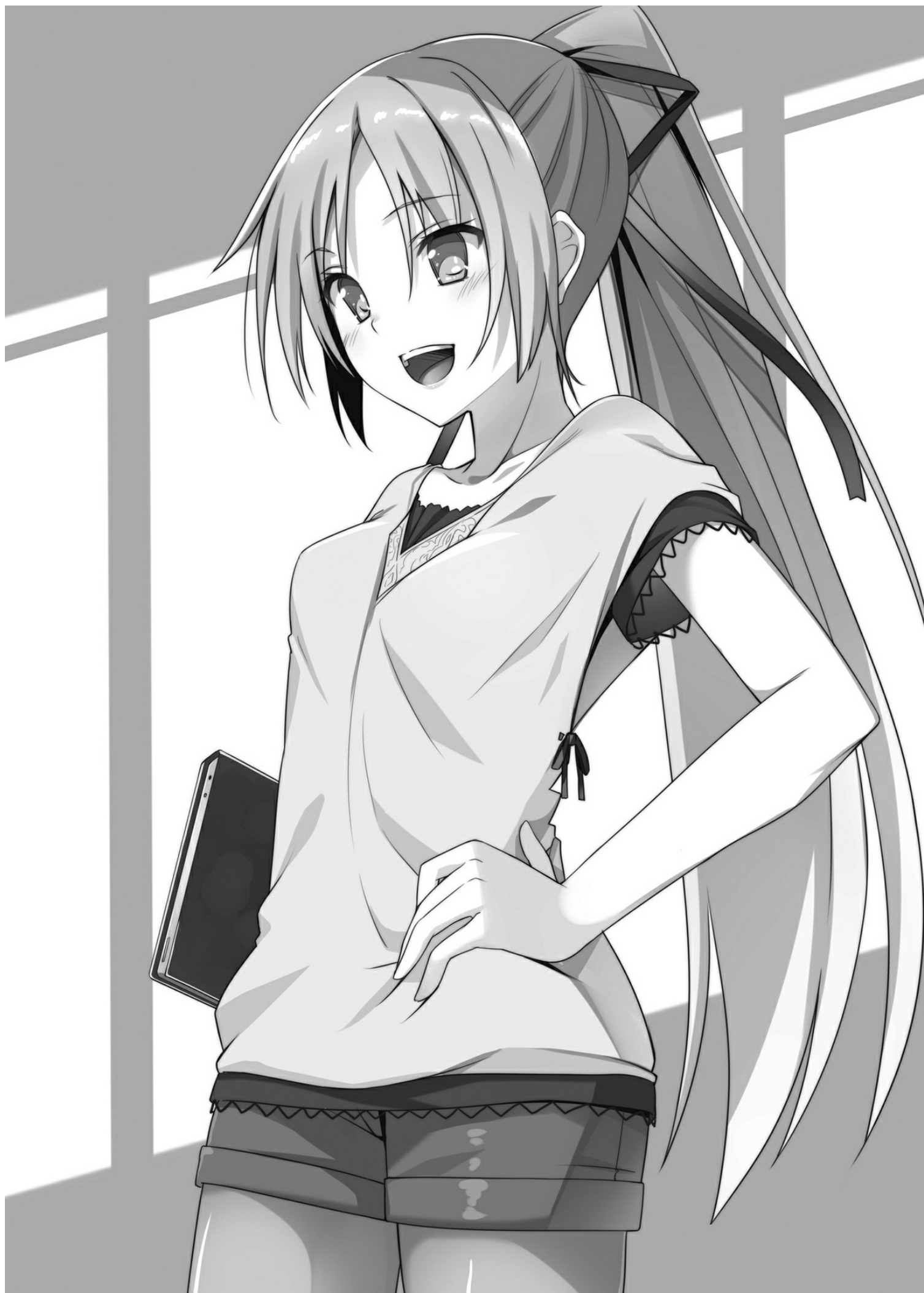
“Ah...!” Yuuto gasped. “What is it?! Just what is the secret behind Yggdrasil?!”

Saya’s ominous phrasing had stirred up the anxiety within him. With that kind of language, it must really be something bad.

Yuuto gulped, waiting. Saya slowly opened her mouth to speak.

“I’ll just go ahead and say it, then. The true identity of Yggdrasil. It’s...”





“Woow, look at this feast! It all looks so delicious!” Mitsuki’s eyes sparkled as she looked over the colorful display of foods lined up on the table.

Felicia and five other girls were in the room, all except one already sitting around the table.

Felicia smiled, and with a subtle gesture, encouraged her to enter the room. “It may not be much, but we wanted to have this welcoming party for you, Big Sister Mitsuki.”

“F-for me?!” Mitsuki squeaked in surprise.

This whole time, she had been considering herself as nothing more than an “extra” meant to go along with Yuuto. And since Yuuto hadn’t been summoned, she wasn’t expecting to receive any special treatment on her own.

“Of course. Surely you must have been tense during that meeting we attended? So I thought it would be better if we had a gathering of just us women, where we could relax and talk as we please. I know it must be difficult for you right now without Big Brother Yuuto here, but I hope you are able to relax and enjoy yourself a bit.” Felicia finished her explanation and offered Mitsuki a gentle, reassuring smile.

This, then, must be the equivalent of the girls-only get-togethers that Mitsuki was already so familiar with in the modern world.

Just as Felicia was saying, the men Mitsuki had encountered in the council meeting before had all been fierce-looking types, like her image of people from the Yakuza, so she hadn’t been able to keep her composure.

By contrast, this girls-only space felt much more safe, and she felt like she could let her guard down a bit.

Mitsuki’s feelings of relief and happiness brought her to tears. “Th-thank you very much! It’s just like you said. The truth is, being stuck here alone like this, I’ve been so worried, and...”

She wasn’t even able to finish her sentence. She’d been managing to endure it thus far, but the truth was that this was terribly frightening for her. She questioned whether she could take care of herself for a whole month, or

whether the people of this foreign land would ever accept her the way they'd accepted Yuuto.

She was carrying a constant feeling of worry inside her that bordered on dread.

Mitsuki turned to face the seated girls and bowed deeply to them. "Everyone, thank you all for coming here. I'm inexperienced and know almost nothing about the ways of your world, and so I hope you will forgive me for any trouble I cause for you."

The second Mitsuki finished speaking, a hearty laugh rang out. "Pfffff! Ha ha ha!"

Oh no. I wonder if I said something strange already, Mitsuki worried, and looked in the direction of the voice's owner. It was one of the girls seated at the table, who had bright red hair.

The red-haired girl smiled cheerfully at Mitsuki. "Hey, sorry about laughing there. It's just, you've got the same exact face, but you're such a completely different person. I was expecting you to be all prissy and haughty like that girl was, but you're so different that I couldn't help but laugh."

"I-Ingrid! You are being rude to Big Sister Mitsuki!" Felicia reprimanded. "And that goes for Lady Rífa, as well. You mustn't use terms like 'that girl' to describe her!"

"Ohh, right. Yeah, you wouldn't believe it, but that girl *is* the Divine Empress, after all... Gah, I already said it again!"

"Sigh... As I have told you so many times now, you must be more careful of how you speak. Even during today's clan council meeting, for example, you referred to Big Brother casually by name only."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'll be careful."

"Please do." Felicia shook her head and sighed wearily.

Judging by that, this was something she'd had to give warnings about countless times now.

Ingrid laughed once more, a little uncomfortably, and then looked as if she'd

suddenly realized something important. She turned to Mitsuki again.

“I’m sorry Lady Mitsuki, I still haven’t introduced myself. My name is Ingrid, and...”

“Yes, I know,” Mitsuki cut in, finishing the introduction for her. “You’re Yuukun’s fellow craftsman and partner in the forge, and you’re the close friend he can always count on to be able to talk with normally. Right?”

Ingrid’s wide eyes showed she was a bit surprised at Mitsuki’s knowledge.

Mitsuki smiled to herself, feeling a bit accomplished. She continued. “And I know everyone else here, too. Sigrún, Kristina, Albertina, and Ephelia.” She pointed to each of them as she recited their names.

She’d heard so much about them from Yuuto, and she’d seen pictures of them, too. She was pretty much familiar with who was who, and generally what sort of personalities they had.

“Wow, you’re amazing, Big Sis Mitsuki!” Albertina exclaimed. “It’s your first time meeting me and Kris, and you were able to tell us apart!” She clapped her hands, apparently quite impressed.

Indeed, the twins had the same face, so in pictures, it was hard to tell them apart. But after meeting them in person, Mitsuki could easily tell the difference. There was something different about their expressions, and a subtle difference in the “air” about them.

Of course, the clue that gave her the most confidence was the position of the side ponytails they wore.

“Al, Lady Mitsuki is to be Father’s wife, so you must address her as ‘Mother,’” Kristina scolded. “She is not your ‘Big Sis.’”

“Huuuh?! But... but, Kris, you’re the one who told me to call her Big Sis!”

“I have no recollection of that at all.”

“But I remember it!”

“Heh, how completely ridiculous.”

“Y-you’re totally laughing at me like I’m some sort of joke!”

“Of course I am! It’s certainly a joke to trust the memory of a girl who gets the lowest score on every test at school!”

“Gyaah! S-stop! Don’t tell them about that!”

“When I saw you’d spelled your own name wrong, I nearly had a dizzy spell, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Auugh...! B-but... but... you *did* tell me to call her Big Sis! I’m telling the truth!”

“I’m sure that must have been just a dream you had. I can’t believe you. Can you really not tell the difference between dreams and reality?”

“W-wait, really? Now that you’ve said that, it does feel like it could have been a dream. Maybe that was it! Oh, I’m sorry for acting like that, Kris.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I do not mind at all. After all, I *did* actually tell you to do it.”

Thud! Albertina fell right out of her chair and hit the floor.

Kristina looked down on her sister, the corners of her mouth curled up in a devilish, satisfied grin.

“Wow, it’s just like what I’ve heard!” Mitsuki giggled as she watched the twins. “Hee hee, you two really are close, aren’t you? It’s good to see sisters get along so well.”

Kristina looked a bit taken aback by this remark, and stared back at Mitsuki. “That is the first time someone has ever said we were ‘close’ after first meeting us.”

“Really? But you two *are* close, right?”

“...That is a difficult question to answer.”

Albertina stood up and shouted at her sister. “Kris, why can’t you just say we’re close?! You’re gonna make me cry...” In fact, tears were already in her eyes.

Kristina frowned, looking a little put out, and replied in a deadpan tone, “Yes, yes, I love you so much.”

“You don’t sound like you mean it at all!” Albertina shouted back.

“Hee hee.” Mitsuki couldn’t keep herself from giggling some more. “Ha ha ha! You really *are* close.”

Even though she had started to let her guard down a bit at the prospect of this all-girls party, Mitsuki had still been a little nervous to begin with, but now she was fully relaxed.

She knew from Yuuto that Kristina was a smart girl who was especially skilled at being considerate of others. Perhaps her funny interaction with her sister here was designed to help relieve Mitsuki of her tension.

Naturally, Sigrún began taking the two girls to task. “This is supposed to be Mother’s welcoming celebration, and both of you have wasted no time in making embarrassments of yourselves,” she said with disgust. “Get it together, both of you.”

Mitsuki looked at Sigrún more closely. Seeing her up close like this, her face was so beautiful, like sculpted porcelain — it almost looked divine. She was so slender, like a model...

No, she looks just like a beautiful elf from out of a fantasy video game, Mitsuki realized with awe.

“Though it seems you know of me, I beg your pardon for an introduction,” the beautiful girl said. “I am Sigrún. I am the head of Father’s palace guard. All of tonight’s food has been thoroughly examined, so please know that you have nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, that’s right! Sigrún, I heard that you can detect poisons. Yuu-kun told me that he was always grateful to you for that. He said that it was thanks to you that he always got to enjoy his meals while they were fresh.”

“F-Father said such wonderful things to you about me...?!” Sigrún’s normally stiff and gallant expression broke into an earnest, adorably happy smile.

Knowing Yuuto, he would have certainly told Sigrún as much himself, but for Sigrún, it must be that much more rewarding to hear that he’d given the same opinion to another person, too.

“Well, then.” Felicia lightly clapped her hands, re-grasping the reins of the conversation. “Shall we eat? I am sure that Big Sister Mitsuki must be hungry by

now.”

“Ohh, you’re right about that. I’m starving, really.” Mitsuki put a hand on her stomach.

She’d only had a bit of food in the morning, and then had to go without anything all day, and it was now after sundown. That was because in Yggdrasil, two meals a day was the norm: a breakfast and supper.

Mitsuki was used to a lifestyle of three meals a day, and so now that the clan meeting had wrapped up, her stomach was so empty that she could barely stand it. It was honestly a stroke of good fortune that she’d managed to get out of there without her stomach loudly gurgling and embarrassing her.

Standing at the entrance to the room, a small, cute little girl took a step forward and called out in a very stiff, nervous voice, “P-please, let me know what it is you would like to eat, and I will bring it to you!”

“Huh?! No, it’s fine, I can get it myself. And besides, why don’t you sit and eat with us, Ephelia? Look, there’s even an open seat right there.”

“N-n-no, no I simply couldn’t! A simple serving girl like me simply couldn’t sit together with the high captains of the clan; it would be unthinkable!” Ephelia rejected the offer outright, and her whole body was shaking like a puppy just plucked out of an icy stream.

Mitsuki got the feeling she understood why Yuuto felt like treating this little girl like his little sister. The way she talked, and her mannerisms, were so adorable, like a cute little animal.

“You needn’t treat yourself so humbly around us, Ephy,” Felicia said. “The teacher at your school has been praising your studies, and says you are a very exceptional student. At this rate, I am sure the day will come soon when Big Brother will offer you his Chalice. It is just a matter of when, not if.”

“N-no, that’s impossible.” Ephelia only grew more stubborn in response to Felicia’s gentle attempts to soothe her. “S-someone as low as me, exchanging the Chalice oath with the patriarch... That would surely never happen, not as long as I live!”

Of course, that was due to Ephelia’s perspective, in which she was at the

lowest rung of society. It was perhaps only natural that talk of someone like her exchanging the Oath of the Chalice directly with the patriarch at the top would make no sense to her.

“Okay, then,” Albertina chimed in, “in that case, you can become Father’s concubine, along with me!”

Albertina’s remark had been totally innocent, but that did not make its impact any less explosive. In an instant, the air in the room seemed to freeze over.

Unlike the culture of monogamous marriage in the modern world, polygyny was standard practice in the world of Yggdrasil. It was not an issue for a man to take many women as wives or mistresses, as long as he had the means to provide for them all. In fact, that was considered perfectly natural according to the values of Yggdrasil.

Still, even with that being true, there *was* still an issue or two with openly declaring that one would become a man’s mistress right in front of the woman who was going to be his first wife.

Kristina shook her head wearily and sighed. “Honestly, Al, you never do change. You always manage to say just the wrong thing for the occasion...”

“Huh? Oh, ohhh, right. Then let’s *all* become Father’s concubines. That way, no one will be left out!” Cluelessly, Albertina threw out another bomb of a statement.

“P-please, forgive my sister’s words, Mother.” Kristina immediately grabbed the back of Albertina’s head and pushed it down onto the table in a forced bow, and simultaneously bowed her own head as well. “She is just a child, and knows not what she is saying.”

Whatever else she might do, in situations like this, Kristina did act to protect her sister.

However, though Albertina’s remarks had been incredibly disrespectful...

“Snerk... Ahahahaha!” Mitsuki’s reaction was to burst out loudly in laughter.

She was laughing so hard she had tears in the corners of her eyes.

“Yeah, you’re right. You’re right, that way no one would be left out, would

they?" Mitsuki nodded as she used a finger to wipe the tears away.

Of course, this left the rest of the girls dumbstruck. They stared at her with mouths agape, as if they couldn't believe what she'd said.

"B-Big Sister Mitsuki, are you truly fine with that?" Felicia asked. She seemed as if she were asking on behalf of everyone, not just herself.

As noted before, in the land of Yggdrasil, it was completely normal for a man with lots of wealth and power to have many women at his side.

Be that as it may, it was in a woman's nature to want to have the man she loved all to herself. That was something the women seated around the table all understood.

And in Yuuto's case, his marriage to Mitsuki was not a political one. It was a marriage out of love. Furthermore, the two of them had only just recently declared their love and become betrothed.

And yet the future wife in question had herself just spoken as if she would forgive her beloved for having relationships with other women. It was no surprise that the other women at the table were taken aback.

Mitsuki understood how they must be feeling.

She shrugged. "Of course, I'm not *really* fine with it. But in my home country, there's a certain saying. 'Heroes and great men are also great lovers of women.' I figure if I let myself be bothered about his having affairs, there's no mistake that it would eat away at me and wear me down completely."

She gave a long, resigned sigh.

"U-um, Big Sister Mitsuki," Felicia said hesitantly, "if you will forgive me being so forward, Big Brother has always been completely faithful and devoted in his love to you. I think that distrusting his faithfulness is not..."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not doubting Yuu-kun. Or, I should say, I've decided I don't *want* to doubt him."

"Erm...?"

"Yuu-kun's a lord here, and I'm sure he's already popular with many women here," Mitsuki explained. "All of you here right now love Yuu-kun, don't you?"

Not just as your patriarch, but also as a man.”

At those words, almost all of the people in that room reflexively averted their eyes from Mitsuki’s.

That was the clearest and most concise proof they could give Mitsuki that it was true.

Mitsuki wasn’t saying this to criticize them. Yuuto had fine-looking facial features (at least, from Mitsuki’s perspective), and he was tall by the standards of average height in this world, and he was kind.

He also had status, and wealth, and power.

It would be more strange if girls *hadn’t* fallen for him.

Mitsuki was even willing to guess that over ninety percent of the women working for Yuuto in this palace felt something for him, at least to some extent.

“But, everyone here is also incredibly important to the Wolf Clan,” Mitsuki went on. “You’re all irreplaceable pillars that support it. I can’t just tell you all to stay away from Yuu-kun, to not have any relationship with him.”

If Mitsuki really were to try such a thing, it would surely push the nation toward disaster.

And pushing the nation toward disaster would run counter to Mitsuki’s true wish, which was to lend her strength to her beloved Yuuto as his wife.

He carried the responsibility for the lives of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people on his shoulders. She absolutely did not want to become an obstacle to his duty.

“I also don’t want to spend my time being suspicious and jealous of everyone. Like I said earlier, it would ruin my heart and drive me crazy.”

Mitsuki knew that it would only lead to her spending every day scared, searching for the slinking shadows of other women.

She might be able to withstand it at first, but eventually, she wouldn’t be able to control herself anymore. She could picture how she might end up taking out all her frustration on Yuuto.

If that was how things were going to end up, then...

“Yuu-kun is a great man, and he’s capable of great things,” Mitsuki said. “He doesn’t just belong to me, but to everyone. I decided before I even came here that I wouldn’t try to keep him all for myself. So that’s why I laughed: I thought it was funny that someone else came out and said it before I got the chance to.”

Mitsuki giggled once more.

Going by the values of the 21st century, Mitsuki’s logic was a way of thinking that only served the conveniences of men. But this was many millennia in the past. This was still a world of patriarchal societies, where the belief that women should be subservient to men was widespread and rampant.

And so, it was within the values of this world that Mitsuki’s conclusion was judged.

“I should have expected no less from the one Big Brother chose to be his bride,” Felicia said happily. “I am overwhelmed with admiration of your character.”

She stood up from her seat, then got down on one knee.

It seemed that all of the women present were just as equally affected.

Each of them moved to line up with Felicia, kneeling and bowing their heads to Mitsuki.

Over the next few days, stories of this event spread throughout the palace and throughout lárnvíðr, and on the lips of all who repeated the tale, opinion was united: *“This is the magnanimous character of a true lord’s wife.”*

And so, without ever realizing it herself, Mitsuki gained the emphatic support of the citizens as Yuuto’s first wife and queen.



Speaking into the smartphone pressed to his ear, Yuuto gave a heavy sigh. “So if I want to go there, I’ll need a seiðr user even stronger than Sigyn, then.”

He was talking with Mitsuki. It was finally late enough at night, so he had asked for an update on the situation right away.

“It seems like we might be able to do something if we had that girl who looks just like me, Rífa, but it looks like there are problems with doing that because of her position.”

“Ah, yeah, well, that girl *is* technically their empress, after all.”

“Hee hee.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just that today Ingrid-san called her ‘that girl’ in the same tone you just did.”

“Ha ha. Well, that was because, when she first came to lárnvíðr, she was a stuck-up princess who didn’t know her left from her right when it came to the outside world,” Yuuto said with a wry smile. She had been a real troublemaker, and he’d always been stuck dealing with the aftermath.

“Yuu-kun, is everything okay?” Mitsuki asked suddenly. She sounded worried. “Your voice sounds a little down; did something happen?”

Yuuto felt his heart beat louder. “No, it’s just that I’m still a bit shocked over not being able to go back to Yggdrasil.”

Yuuto did his best to hide his emotions, and act natural.

It wasn’t really a lie.

Right now, the Panther and Lightning Clans weren’t making any movements, but he wasn’t sure when they’d attack again, and it was making him terribly uneasy.

Against those two clans, the “wagon wall” defensive tactic wasn’t a sure thing anymore, and neither were any of the other strategies the Wolf Clan had already used against them.

He glanced over at the bag placed near his bed. Inside was the secret weapon that was sure to defeat the two enemy clans.

As always, preparation was the key. Not having been able to return during last night’s full moon was going to have painful results.

“At least for now, I’m glad to hear you’re doing well,” Yuuto said. “I’ll call you

again tomorrow. Good night, Mitsuki.”

“Ah, okay. Good night!”

Ending the call, Yuuto flopped down onto the bed. “...She’s just as sharp as ever.”

The real reason for his lack of cheer on the phone was what Saya had told him regarding the truth of Yggdrasil.

It still wasn’t something he could bring himself to tell Mitsuki. She was doing a lot better than the terrible state of shock she had been in the night before, but she was still all alone in a world with an unfamiliar culture and language. The stress had to be rough.

He would have to tell her eventually, but he would rather wait until she’d had a chance to settle down.

And there was also one more thing he hadn’t been able to tell her.

It was what he’d seen just before Mitsuki disappeared: Her eyes had shone with twin symbols shaped like small birds.

There was no mistaking it. Those were runes.

Why would a girl like her from the present day have runes? There was also the fact that she looked just like Rífa, the Divine Empress of Yggdrasil. Was there some secret about Mitsuki herself, as well?

“Damn, the problems and the mysteries just don’t stop coming,” Yuuto muttered.

ACT 4

“Huh? What am I doing here?” Mitsuki found herself standing, alone, in some sort of garden.

This was very strange. She was sure that until just a moment ago she had been in bed, struggling to fall asleep.

And yet here she was, standing outside all of a sudden.

There was the possibility that she’d been carried here while asleep, but she was pretty certain she would have woken up if someone had tried that.

And she *was* the patriarch’s betrothed, after all. Members of Yuuto’s clan had sworn their absolute loyalty to him, so it was hard to think that one of them would do something disrespectful to her.

Besides, even if there were someone insolent enough to make the attempt, there were the Wolf Clan’s special forces, commanded by Sigrún, who served as the palace guard.

According to Yuuto, they constantly patrolled the palace in shifts, keeping the grounds well-secured. Slipping through that tight security net *and* abducting Mitsuki from her room would be incredibly difficult, at best.

“So that means... I wonder if this is a dream, then?” Mitsuki glanced around at her surroundings.

It was a pretty garden, with bright, white flowers in full bloom surrounding a small pond at the center. Close nearby stood a structure that looked to be made out of kiln-fired bricks; it was a type of religious sanctuary called a “hörgr.”

Mitsuki was pretty sure there wasn’t a sanctuary building like this in lárnvíðr. At the very least, there wasn’t one in any of the places she had been taken to so far. And yet, despite that, looking at it gave her an incredible sense of familiarity, of nostalgia.

At the same time, she also felt a strong sense that something was *wrong*.

Something was strange here, “off” somehow. But she couldn’t put her finger

on it.

As she was puzzling over these feelings, a voice called to her from behind.

“You there, who are you? To have infiltrated my sacred and private space like this, you must be quite the reckless fool.”

Mitsuki turned around, and saw *herself*.

“Huh— Eeeeeeh?!” Mitsuki cried out in sheer surprise, but she wasn’t the only one.

“Wh-what?!”

The other girl was also apparently quite shocked, and her body reflexively pulled backward.

For a second, Mitsuki was fooled by the impression that she was looking at a mirror image of herself, but soon she noticed details about the other girl that were clearly different.

It was mainly her hair and eyes. Mitsuki had black hair and black eyes, but her counterpart had snow-white hair and eyes as red as rubies.

“Are you... Rífa?” Mitsuki asked hesitantly.

She’d heard stories from Yuuto about the girl with the same face as hers. Her full name was Sigrdrífa, and she was the þjóðann, or “Divine Empress.”

The lands of Yggdrasil were all under the dominion of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and the þjóðann reigned supreme at the pinnacle of that hierarchy.

“Then... you must be the one called ‘Mitsuki.’ Lord Yuuto’s love.”

“Oh, um, y-yes! Y-yes, that’s correct, I am that Mitsuki.” Mitsuki’s reply was a little awkward and stammering.

She’d grown up way out in the countryside, without any experience with the “ladylike” etiquette of a high-class society. Faced with the knowledge of how important and esteemed the person in front of her was, it would perhaps be unfair to expect her not to be daunted by that.

“Still, why in the world would Mitsuki be here in... Ngh?! Gh, what is this?!” Rífa shouted.

“What’s wro— Aaaaah!” Mitsuki cried out herself at the sudden burning sensation that assaulted her senses, as if hot irons were being pressed into both of her eyes.

The fiery sensation in her eyes passed after a second, but now it felt as if some sort of incredible energy was flooding her whole body, running rampant, overwhelming her. It was like every drop of blood in her body was burning hot.

Rífa seemed to be suffering from the same condition. Her porcelain-white skin was flushed red, and she was grimacing in pain.

“Ghh, the power from my runes is billowing out of control! This has never happened before. Why would this...”

Rífa stared at Mitsuki wide-eyed, in even greater shock than when they had first seen each other.

“Y-you! Your eyes!”

“Huh?!”

Mitsuki looked into the girl’s eyes and saw two small golden symbols floating within them, like little crosses.

As she continued to look at them, the strange “power” within her began to surge even more...

“Arrgh! So *that’s* what it is! Haaaah...” Rífa seemed to realize something, and began to take slow, deep breaths.

As she did so, the strange power that had been running amok all throughout Mitsuki’s body suddenly calmed down, and then the incredible feeling of heat receded without leaving any trace.

All of Mitsuki’s strength left her, and she dropped to sit on the ground. “Ph-phew... Wh-what was that??”

A feeling of exhaustion overtook her. She felt completely depleted, as if she’d just finished running a hundred-meter dash at a full sprint.

“It would seem that my runes and your runes exert a strange ‘pull’ on each other,” Rífa said.

“Eh? My... runes?” Mitsuki tilted her head in puzzlement.

She knew what runes were: They were the symbols on the bodies of the people known as Einherjar, supposedly proof that they were special people chosen by the gods.

It was a sort of magical phenomenon unique to Yggdrasil, unknown in the modern 21st century world she came from. Of course, there was no way she had any such thing.

Her grades at school were only slightly above the average, and her athletic abilities slightly below. In every sense, she was a perfectly normal and ordinary girl, so—

Mitsuki caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the water of the pond, and let out a scream. “Eh — huh — huaaaaaah?!”

Their shape was different, but her eyes also contained a pair of glowing, golden symbols.

That would mean that she was something even more special than an Einherjar, who were already as rare as one in ten thousand. These were “twin runes.” It was said there were only two twin rune Einherjar in all of Yggdrasil.

“What, am I to take it by your reaction that you have never once realized it all this time? You’re a bit of a dull-headed one, aren’t you?” Rífa gave an exasperated sigh.



Dull-headed... Mitsuki did have some awareness of the fact that she wasn't a very perceptive person, or rather, because of her gentle personality, that she wasn't very analytical. But hearing it phrased that way, and by someone who looked like her twin, left her with some complicated feelings.

"Still, it seems that there must be some strange sort of fate that ties us together," Rífa said. "Not only that odd runic reaction just now, but this strange dream, too."

"Oh, so then this *is* a dream, then."

"Of course it is. Heh, I could never go outside in the daylight." Rífa gave a small chuckle, and looked up at the sky with a smile that looked resigned and lonely. It was an expression that seemed unbefitting of someone as young as her.

Mitsuki followed Rífa's gaze to look up, and realized what was off about this scenery. "Ohh! That's why all the colors here are kind of weird."

The sky itself was clear and blue without a cloud, but the surface of the water in the pond didn't glitter with the reflection of the sunlight, and the greenery in their surroundings seemed somewhat too dark.

In fact, everything around them seemed to be slightly devoid of color, of vibrance. It was as if they were standing under a dark and cloudy sky instead.

That would all make sense if this was a dream created from the mind of someone who never set foot outside on a sunny day.

"So this isn't my dream, but yours, Rífa?" Mitsuki asked.

After all, things would be more normal if it were her own dream.

Mitsuki recalled that she had been thinking about Rífa before falling asleep. She'd been wondering if borrowing Rífa's power was perhaps the only way to be able to summon Yuuto to this world.

Perhaps that had made her able to enter into Rífa's dream like this.

"Rífa... no, Lady Rífa! Please, I need a favor!" Mitsuki got down on her hands and knees, and looked up at Rífa with a grave expression.

This was no ordinary dream; Mitsuki felt a strange sense of absolute certainty about that. The Rífa in front of her was not something she'd dreamed up. This was the real Rífa.

Their similar appearance, and the pair of twin runes they both carried in their eyes, spoke to the truth of what Rífa had said earlier: Maybe there really was some sort fateful connection between them.

This meeting was a stroke of good fortune that Mitsuki could not afford to waste.

"Please, lend me your power, and help summon Yuu-kun!" she cried.

"Hmm, so *that* is what happened." As Rífa finished listening to the explanation behind Yuuto's return to the modern world, she put a hand to her mouth and pondered to herself.

Mitsuki was still not used to the strange feeling that came with talking to Rífa; it was as if she were having a conversation with her own reflection.

"But it had to be Sigyn, did it?" Rífa said. "That is a rather troublesome enemy you are dealing with."

"She... she is?" Mitsuki asked timidly.

She'd heard explanations and stories about Yggdrasil from Yuuto, but in the end, it was all still limited, secondhand information.

She knew that they needed "a seiðr user stronger than Sigyn," but she didn't really have an idea of just how powerful this Sigyn really was.

"She is known as the 'Witch of Miðgarðr,' and tales of her reach me even here in the imperial capital of Glaðsheimr," Rífa explained. "In terms of power, she is one of the strongest three in all of Yggdrasil."

"Sh-she's that amazing?!"

"If the question is who might be able to break that woman's spell, then I would likely be the only one in all of Yggdrasil who could do it." Rífa nodded confidently to herself.

In other words, she was implying that she herself was the most powerful magic user in all of Yggdrasil. It was quite the self-confident assertion.

But right now, that confidence made her seem incredibly dependable.

“Th-then, please let me ask you again!” Mitsuki pleaded. “Would you please help bring Yuu-kun back to Yggdrasil?”

“Mmm...”

Rífa’s expression darkened. Her gaze shifted this way and that, and at last she gave a resigned sigh before speaking.

“For my part, I would very much like to lend you my aid, but asking me to leave Valaskjálf Palace and go to lárnviðr is a difficult request.”

“Th-there isn’t anything you can do about that part?”

“I am sorry. My last visit to lárnviðr was a bit of a reckless action, with its own consequences. And along with the autumn season, my wedding day is fast approaching. There will be too many more scrutinizing eyes on me, and I won’t be free to move about.”

“Nooo...” Mitsuki’s shoulders slumped.

Things had seemed so promising up until this point that it made the disappointment even worse.

Mitsuki tried several more times after that to persuade Rífa, but the girl only shook her head sadly every time.

Still, going by Rífa’s own explanation, she was the only person in Yggdrasil who could break Sigyn’s spell. Mitsuki couldn’t afford to simply back down here.

At this rate, she wasn’t going to get any results. So she decided to try something else, a bit of a gamble.

“S-so you’re not confident you can do it, then?”

“What?” Rífa stared at her.

“The truth is that you aren’t sure you can break Sigyn’s seiðr spell, and if you fail, then it’ll get out that you’re *not* actually the strongest in Yggdrasil!”

“Wh-whaaat?!” Rífa shouted. “Y-you—! How dare you say such a thing?!” Her face was twisted with anger.

Whoa, I can’t believe she fell for something that simple... Mitsuki was taken

aback, even though she had been the one to issue the taunt in the first place.

Right away from the start, Mitsuki had sensed from Rífa's mannerisms a sense of strong pride, which probably came with being the þjóðann, so she'd taken a stab at using that against her. But she hadn't expected the girl to be so defenseless against a little taunting.

"Sigyn's magic would be nothing against mine!" Rífa began ranting defensively, completely unaware that she had just been taken in by Mitsuki's ploy.

At this point, Mitsuki couldn't turn back. In her heart, she whispered an apology to Rífa, then began to taunt her some more.

"If that's the truth, then please prove it!"

"Look, I already *told* you! Right now I cannot leave Valaskjálf Palace!"

"I'm not saying that you need to leave your palace! If you can't leave, then you don't have to! You just need to call Yuu-kun back to Yggdrasil!"

"Excuse me?! You know nothing of seiðr magic, you ignorant girl! The paired mirror necessary for the rite is in lárarviðr, isn't it? Even for someone like me, without that, it... Hm? Paired..."

Rífa's angry rant trailed off, and after a moment of silent thought, she placed a hand to her chin and stared at Mitsuki, looking her up and down.

"U-um...?"

"It *can* be done! We can do it, Mitsuki!" Rífa suddenly grabbed Mitsuki by the shoulders and excitedly shook her back and forth.

At first Mitsuki wasn't sure what was going on, but an instant later she understood the meaning of those words.

"Y-you're sure?!"

"Yes. But everything will depend on you."

"...Huh?" A confused sound escaped Mitsuki's lips. She didn't understand at all.

A grin spread across Rífa's face, and she looked awfully pleased with herself.

“Hee hee. Well, after you went and challenged me with such insolence, I do hope you’re prepared to follow through on what comes next.”

ACT 5

Gashina was the territory where, approximately one month earlier, the Wolf Clan had fought a fierce battle against the allied forces of the Panther and Lightning Clans.

The Wolf Clan had fielded 12,000 troops against the 18,000 combined from the Panther and Lightning Clans. It had been a grand battle on a larger scale than ever before in Yggdrasil's history, and it had ended with the Wolf Clan army defeated and fleeing, having lost both the battle and Yuuto, their commander-in-chief.

That being said, for the first half of the battle, the Wolf Clan had been winning. The series of engagements had been just as fiercely taxing for the Panther and Lightning Clans, and their losses significant.

They had thus chosen to keep their armies at Fort Gashina as a home base, to rest their soldiers and restore their health and morale.

That was now fully accomplished. It was all done: Burials and funeral rites for the dead, treatment for injuries, sending home those who were too injured, and replenishing the ranks and food stocks.

After one month, all of the preparations were in order, and all that remained was to await the order to resume their invasion.

"So, in accordance with the original plan, we of the Lightning Clan will attack eastward, and Uncle's Panther Clan forces will take the north. Is that all correct?" Þjálfi, the Lightning Clan's assistant second-in-command, indicated the appropriate location of the map spread out on the desk in front of him.

In contrast to his abnormally large frame, this man had a sharp eye for small details and was skilled at paying attention to the concerns of those around him. That was why he was acting in his patriarch Steinþórr's stead to handle troop organization and oversee management of their supplies himself. He was the type of man who accomplished great things from behind the scenes.

The clans had decided on the proper day for their attack based on the fortune telling rites of Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr, who had studied the cracks in a

heated tortoise shell. This was their final planning meeting in the fortress courtyard, to confirm the details one last time.

As always, Steinþórr had said, “I don’t care about the details,” and left his subordinate to once again sit in for him in the negotiations.

“I have no objections,” the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr, said tersely, seeming a little bit upset.

Clearly the man wanted very badly to invade lárnvíðr, of course.

In fact, at first he had come up with a plan where he was the one to go along with the Lightning Clan to attack eastward — in other words, into Wolf Clan territory toward their capital, lárnvíðr.

However, from the perspective of the Panther Clan as a whole, there was too little merit in that.

The Panther Clan’s territory already stretched from a large section of the Miðgarðr region all the way down the coast and through the western parts of Álfheimr. Even if the Panther Clan were to conquer the Wolf Clan’s homeland in the western part of the Bifröst region, it would be a detached territory separated from the rest of what they controlled, and very difficult to administrate or defend.

In that case, the most realistic option was for the Lightning Clan to conquer their eastern neighbor and greatly expand their territory, and for the Panther Clan to receive large amounts of food, supplies, valuables and the like, as compensation for their assistance and cooperation in the war. That was the most likely scenario that would occur.

Certainly, that would be an enormous prize in terms of wealth. But within lárnvíðr was a mountain of extremely valuable glasswares, as well as a veritable mountain of inventions and knowledge introduced by Yuuto, still unknown even to Hveðrungr. Compared to that potential wealth of knowledge, the tribute payments seemed like a pittance.

In addition to gaining all of that for themselves, the Lightning Clan would thus greatly expand their territory, power, and population, so this wasn’t at all pleasing to Hveðrungr.

Now that his hated nemesis Yuuto was banished to a place he could not be reached, the flames in Hveðrungr's heart had cooled, and he no longer felt the same sense of obsession toward the Wolf Clan that he once had.

And so Hveðrungr had decided to prioritize what was profitable, and elected to follow a plan where he attacked northward — into Horn Clan territory, which currently shared a border with the Panther Clan.

“However.” Hveðrungr glared at Þjálfí.

The sharp light in his eyes would have pierced through an average soldier and left him shaking, but Þjálfí was a seasoned veteran, a warrior known by the alias Járnglófi, the Iron Gauntlet.

Þjálfí met Hveðrungr's gaze head-on and acknowledged him with a nod. “I understand. Both Felicia the Wise Wolf and the master craftsman Ingrid, they are to be captured and kept alive, yes?”

“Indeed. You will hand them over to me without fail. That is my price for all of the aid we have given you.”

Felicia had once been Hveðrungr's beloved younger sister in his former life as Loptr, and even now, she was his only surviving blood relative.

He desperately wanted to retrieve her and return her to his side.

And then there was the master craftsman, the girl Ingrid.

When it came to the development of the Wolf Clan's various new weapons and tools, their patriarch Yuuto had been the one most publicly celebrated for all of it, but Hveðrungr suspected that it was actually Ingrid who had been making everything. Her high position in the Wolf Clan ranks pointed to that conclusion, as well.

In other words, if Hveðrungr could get his hands on her, he could have the Wolf Clan's technologies for himself.

She was a living treasure.

Hveðrungr was only able to make this analysis because of his close familiarity with the Wolf Clan's domestic affairs. If by chance the Lightning Clan were to figure out Ingrid's importance, they would surely not be as eager to agree to

capture and give her to him.

The current era was such that normally, one could know very few details about the inner workings of another nation. And so, as far as the Lightning Clan understood, Ingrid was “a famously talented blacksmith” and nothing more.

“We, of course, have no desire to face the Horn Clan at the moment,” Þjálfi said. “Our last battle left a lasting impression on us, you see. So your price is quite a bargain for us.”

Þjálfi’s phrase “a lasting impression” probably referred to when Sigrún had led a breakaway force of soldiers to Fort Gashina back from the Lightning Clan.

Having the fortress they’d seized get captured from them again had broken the spirits of the Lightning Clan, and they had nearly fallen apart from the loss of morale.

Thankfully, Steinþórr had taken the position of leading the rearguard as they retreated, keeping casualties low, but for Þjálfi, it had been a chilling experience.

If the Lightning Clan was putting all of their military force into destroying the Wolf Clan, that necessarily meant they would be leaving their border with the Horn Clan thinly defended.

And so, if the Horn Clan were to push across the border and harass Lightning Clan territory, it would be just like what happened with the fortress. Having their home lands attacked would leave the men in no state to care about the capture of lárnvíðr.

Hveðrungr’s invasion of the Horn Clan served to eliminate that fear for the Lightning Clan, and so it was the perfect proposal for them.

“Fine, then,” Hveðrungr said shortly. “Is there anything else that the Lightning Clan wants to check with me on?”

“No, sir, nothing.”

“I see. Then I’ll take my leave to rest in preparation for tomorrow’s advance.”

“Yes, sir. May you fare well in battle!”

“You, as well.” With a single nod, Hveðrungr turned, his mantle momentarily

catching the wind in a flourish, and he made his way quickly out of the room.

With each step he took, the corners of Hveðrungr's mouth twisted into an ever more menacing grin. The flames of vengeance within him had grown weaker. But they had not disappeared completely.

"Heh... I hear that the Horn patriarch Linnea has gotten a lot of special attention from Yuuto as his dear younger sister. I'll be sure to satisfy my grudge a bit by torturing her long and well."

A messenger brought news of the start of a new war to Linnea just as she was ending her midday break and returning to her office for her afternoon work.

"I... I have news to report! The Panther Clan forces stationed at Fort Gashina have left marching northward, and have begun an invasion! Their numbers are estimated to be around ten thousand!"

Linnea was patriarch of the Horn Clan, and her nation controlled the fertile lands between the Körmt and Örmt Rivers.

She was a young girl with a delicate physique, but even Yuuto placed his full praise and trust in her skills at administration and governance.

"So they've made their move at last," Linnea said grimly. "Is it just the Panther Clan? Tell me what the Lightning Clan is doing!"

"Yes, ma'am! The Lightning Clan's eight thousand troops are advancing to the east!"

"Eight thousand..." Linnea grimaced bitterly, as if she'd swallowed a bug. She sighed and leaned against the back of her chair.

The Wolf Clan, after their huge loss at the Battle of Gashina, didn't have even ten thousand troops to field at this point. They weren't in any shape to lend the Horn Clan any spare soldiers for defense. In other words, she couldn't expect any aid from allies here.

"Send a dispatch to all troops stationed near the border," she ordered. "Don't let them cross the Körmt River! Fight them to the death at the water's edge, if it comes to that!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The army messenger snapped to attention, and turned to fly

out of Linnea's office at a run.

Linnea had been wary of the possibility that the enemy armies concentrated in Gashina might attack her, and so she already had three thousand soldiers positioned along the northern bank of the Körmt River.

It was one of the usual strategies of battle: Form ranks at the water's edge facing the river, and pound the enemy with force as they attempt to cross from the other side.

While enemies attempted to cross, they would be hindered by the current and lose their footing, and their movements and reactions would be slowed. It made them perfect targets for archers.

And for those enemies who made it through the hail of arrow fire and up onto the bank, they would be outnumbered by the allied forces waiting there for them.

Furthermore, the Körmt River in particular was wide with a deep bottom for almost every region of its territory that it ran through. It was a natural defense more effective than any plain old fortress at halting enemy advances.

With any normal enemy army, the Horn Clan should be able to repel them at the river with ease.

However...

Only after Linnea was sure the messenger's footsteps were far distant, she allowed herself a long, bitter sigh. "I gave the order easily enough, but this doesn't look good..."

The enemy army was at least three times the size of her own. And to make matters worse, that huge force was all armed cavalry, every soldier skilled at combat and archery from horseback. They were an *army* of elite soldiers.

The western border needed to be maintained with a necessary minimum of defensive troops, as well. Gathering every able man they could for the fight would still limit the Horn Clan to perhaps three thousand at the very maximum.

That wasn't nearly enough to be sure of holding the enemy back.

"For now, I'll just have to send out requests for aid to the Mountain Dog and

Wheat Clans... even if I can't expect a favorable reply."

Around the time of the New Year's Festival, Yuuto had arranged for those clans to exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with hers, becoming her sister clans.

She had already sent them messages many times now, requesting that they send her aid in the event that the Panther or Lightning Clans attacked, but she had yet to receive a definitive reply from either of them.

They were weaker clans than hers in terms of size and strength, so the oath sworn between them placed Linnea and her clan as the "older sibling."

According to the sacred custom of the Chalice, the younger siblings had a duty to listen to the requests or demands of the older, but when it came to the vows between patriarchs of entire clans, pragmatism entered into it somewhat.

One had to consider one's duty to protect the "children" of their own clan, after all. They were hardly going to consider committing their people to a war they felt certain to lose.

Rasmus, her former second-in-command and current senior advisor, had once suggested to her that now was the time to seize control of the alliance with the Wolf Clan, since they were losing their uniting influence. And yet, *this* was the current situation of the Horn Clan.

"Now, what should I do?" Linnea pondered.

Yuuto's sudden return to his homeland beyond the heavens had been due to Sigyn's magic; she'd already learned as much from reports from the Wolf Clan.

For a short time, information had been spotty and confused, and so there had been reports of Yuuto having died in battle at Gashina. Linnea had leapt for joy when she'd learned the truth of his survival.

On the other hand, as clan patriarch, Linnea was unsure of how best to interpret this new information and deal with it. It was honestly quite frustrating.

A ruling lord's death always created uncertainty and instability, an opening into which it was easy for neighboring nations to insert themselves. And so it

was an all too common story in history that a ruler's death might be kept secret for a time, until the next ruler with solid support and authority was established.

Thinking about this situation normally, it seemed more likely that this was one more example of such deception.

The explanation that he had come from a land beyond the heavens, and that he was alive there but had failed to return, might be nothing more than attempts to put on an appearance of strength to other nations.

The reports that the summoning rite in lárarviðr the previous night had simply ended in failure only served to add fuel to such suspicions.

"But I still believe in you," she whispered. "I believe in you, Big Brother."

A person like him, who was practically a god of warfare reborn, could not possibly just up and die like that!

Linnea still remembered the time in Gimlé when Yuuto had told her his story about coming to Yggdrasil from another world.

And she still believed that Yuuto was the kind of man who would never abandon his family when they had fallen into danger.

The next full moon was in twenty days.

She could hold out that long, somehow.

She *would* hold out.

With renewed resolve in her heart, Linnea turned back to her desk.

She would do what she could, and she would make every last effort.

At around the same time that Linnea received her report, the same information reached Jörgen.

"Sir, I have unpleasant news to report," Kristina said, waving a piece of paper in her hand. "The Lightning and Panther Clan armies that were at Fort Gashina have both started advancing."

She held out the paper to Jörgen. It contained detailed notes on the two armies' movements and their number of soldiers.

"I would have liked them to stay put for just a little while longer, if I'm being

honest,” Jörgen grumbled.

Their last attempt to summon Yuuto had failed, after all, and there was no sure plan to guarantee success of the next one. As the saying went, “Misfortune never arrives alone.”

Of course, he knew the enemy wasn’t about to spare them any mercy on account of their situation.

He glanced back at Kristina. “Has the same information reached Skáviðr in Gimlé?”

“Yes, naturally,” she replied.

The governor of Gimlé, Olof, had chosen to lead the rearguard after the Battle of Gashina. He had performed that duty with excellence, and had died an honorable warrior’s death.

After consulting with Yuuto, the one chosen to replace him in that position was Skáviðr, the Wolf Clan’s assistant second-in-command.

Skáviðr had previously been stationed in Myrkviðr, the walled city at the western edge of Horn Clan territory. But, if the enemy were able to capture Gimlé, the Wolf Clan capital Íárnviðr would be within arm’s reach.

Skáviðr had been chosen because of his reputation as a master of fighting defensive battles.

Kristina furrowed her brow. “Still, even with the assistant second in charge, I wonder if they will really be capable of holding off the enemy’s advance?”

Back when the Wolf Clan was being led by its previous patriarch, Fárbaumi, Skáviðr had repelled numerous invasion attempts by the Claw Clan.

As the daughter by birth of the Claw Clan’s patriarch, Kristina knew well how capable Skáviðr was.

Even so, anyone would have to admit that this time, he was outmatched.

There were only about four thousand soldiers stationed in Gimlé, and no more than two thousand at the very most could be sent there as reinforcements.

Six thousand men.

Currently, this was the upper limit of what the Wolf Clan could mobilize.

But their enemy was the Lightning Clan army, led by the inhumanly powerful Steinþórr. It would be an uneasy contest even with *equal* troop strengths.

Not even being able to gather the same number of soldiers was going to make this extremely tough, to say the least.

“That’s exactly why I’ve sent requests to your birth father to send us some damn men already, three times now,” Jörgen said. “And he’s somehow managed to slither his way out of giving a response each time.”

He glared sharply at Kristina, but it wasn’t enough to frighten someone like her. She met his eyes and calmly shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, I shouldn’t think he would commit himself to anything in this situation. He is not the type to join a battle on the side that he knows will lose.”

“That’s a pretty blunt way to put it.”

“My responsibility is gathering and organizing information. If you would prefer to hear comforting fairy tales instead, please feel free to call upon someone else.”

“Such an unpleasant girl. You really do take after your birth father.” Jörgen spat out the words with a look of annoyance on his face, but in a sense it was also meant as a compliment.

In a crisis like this, there were few outcomes more terrible than trusting and relying on reinforcements, only to have them not show up.

This blunt assessment was far more helpful than a response playing up the relationship with the Claw Clan and trying to sway him with false reassurances.

“Then let me ask a different question,” Jörgen said. “If Father returns, will the Claw Clan join us?”

“Yes, without a doubt.” Kristina nodded firmly.

Jörgen decided that he would have to be content with that.

Considering these circumstances, it was an improvement just knowing that

they'd lend their aid if Yuuto returned. And this was likely thanks to the fact that the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid was receiving *accurate* information from Kristina.

After the huge loss at Gashina, the Wolf Clan's ability to unite and solidify the greater region was, unfortunately, in sharp decline.

The Ash, Mountain Dog, and Wheat Clans, which had all only recently become subsidiary allies to the Wolf Clan, were all still sitting on the fence in this conflict.

And unlike with the Claw Clan, it was uncertain if they'd change their stance even if Yuuto returned.

Technically speaking, Yuuto had never lost a battle in command, but in these circumstances, it wouldn't be strange for other clans to see the previous defeat as having happened under Yuuto's command, despite the truth of his absence.

Of course, this one instance of defeat wouldn't be enough to completely destroy Yuuto's reputation, but it was safe to assume that he would no longer project the same god-like charisma.

So it was more than likely those clans wouldn't make any move to aid the Wolf Clan unless the momentum shifted, with a clear-cut Wolf Clan victory.

Presently the only ones who would be steadfast allies were the earnest and dutiful Linnea and her Horn Clan. But they were dealing with the Panther Clan army, and so were likely just as desperate for reinforcements from the Wolf Clan.

This was a truly dire, even hopeless situation. And yet...

"Ha ha ha, then your birth father really is a clever man," Jörgen responded a hearty laugh. "That's right, if Father comes back, the Wolf Clan cannot lose!"

Strangely enough, Jörgen felt a sense of certainty deep down: That somehow, Yuuto would figure out a way to fix this.

He was the man who had devised a way to produce the divine metal iron, who had turned the sun black on cue, who had made rocks fall from the heavens onto his foes, who had unleashed a raging flood.

He was a worker of miracles, and he would surely bring about more of them.

“If we hold out until the next full moon, we’ll win.” Jörgen’s lips curled up into a grin full of confidence. “I have every hope in Father’s chosen bride. She will find a way to help us, I’m sure of it.”

Three days after having begun their advance, the Lightning Clan troops were beset by fierce rainstorms.

Yggdrasil had already seen the advent of basic straw raincoats, but the climate was such that there wasn’t a particularly huge amount of rainfall on average, and so it wasn’t customary for armies on the march to take raincoats with them.

Because of that, when heavy rains beset a moving army, they would temporarily call a halt and take shelter under trees or rocks, or take over local residences if there were any nearby, and wait out the storm. They would also make use of large tarps made from cloth coated in oil.

As luck would have it, there was a farming village close by, so the Lightning Clan had driven out the residents and occupied their buildings.

It was a cruel and villainous act, but one that was completely normal and common for this era.

Inside the village chief’s house, the Lightning Clan second-in-command Þjálfí was trying to explain the current situation to his patriarch Steinþórr.

“According to reports from our lookouts, the Wolf Clan has around six thousand troops, all told,” Þjálfí reported. “At present they are formed up on the eastern bank of the Élivágar River, waiting for us. Their flags and insignias indicate the commander is the assistant second-in-command Skáviðr. No sighting was made of anyone resembling Patriarch Suoh-Yuuto.”

Þjálfí’s freewheeling patriarch was always more likely than not to respond to reports with his customary, “Who cares about the details.” That was why condensing and reporting the essential info to him was Þjálfí’s role.

Once Þjálfí finished, Steinþórr scoffed, looking completely bored. “Hmph, so he’s not there. So he really did get taken down at Gashina, then?”

“We still haven’t heard of any funeral for him being held in lárnvíðr, but that’s what’s likely,” Þjálfi replied.

It was a common strategy throughout history to try to hide the death of a powerful and influential ruler. On the other hand, it was very rare for such attempts to see any real success.

People will talk, and word will travel.

There were merchants who visited the palace in lárnvíðr for business, and servants who worked on the grounds. A little bribe here and there was enough to learn the fact that no one in lárnvíðr had seen Yuuto in the past month.

Several people also said that Suoh-Yuuto had come from the heavens, and that they were holding rites to pray for his second coming; it was downright laughable hearing someone exalted to this extent.

It was likely part of a calculated bit of propaganda aimed at people both inside the Wolf Clan and out, meant to claim Suoh-Yuuto was still alive and well somewhere, and to buy the clan some extra time politically.

Honestly, it was a poor excuse for a story.

But whatever the truth might be, the Wolf Clan lacked Suoh-Yuuto, and with only six thousand troops, they no longer posed any real threat.

“Tch. Sounds to me like this battle’s gonna be boring as hell,” Steinþórr griped.

“I would consider that a matter worth celebrating, personally.”

“Well, they *do* have that scraggly wolf commanding them. I hope that at least gives me something to sink my teeth into, even just a bit. ...But with this rain, you think we’ll still be stuck here through tomorrow?”

“Possibly, yes. We’re at the mercy of the heavens, unfortunately.”

“Aaaughh, I feel like I’m gonna die of boredom!” Steinþórr groaned.

After spending more than half a day cooped up in this cramped house, Steinþórr looked like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

Incidentally, this was the largest building, and the tiny farming village only had

a population of a few dozen people. It was never going to be able to contain an army of eight thousand.

So the only ones permitted to stay in the buildings were those of high status, and the vast majority of the soldiers were camping out in the area surrounding the village. Even this cramped building was a great luxury.

“Hey, Þjálfí,” Steinþórr put in. “If you’re done with the reports, help me fight off this boredom. Let’s have a bit of arm wrestling.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There is absolutely no way I could possibly win against you.”

“No worries; of course I’ll give you a handicap. How about I use just my pinky finger, and you can use both arms?” Steinþórr got down on the floor and stood one arm up by the elbow, wiggling his pinky.

If it were anyone else doing this, it would unmistakably be taken as a deliberate insult.

Þjálfí sighed, unable to hide his weary body language. “Try that with someone else, if you please. I don’t want to get injured right before a major battle.”

“Aw, man, you’re no fun.”

“Please don’t look to me for your...”

Bwoooooh! Bwoooooh! Bwoooooh! All of a sudden, blaring warhorns were ringing out.

“Heh, looks like things are getting good, after all!” Steinþórr broke into a grin.

“This is not in any way ‘good’!” Þjálfí immediately scolded his patriarch.

Indeed, this was not good at all.

Weren’t the Wolf Clan troops supposed to be on the east bank of the river?! Þjálfí thought in a panic.

This village was two days’ march away from the Élivágar River, and there was this heavy storm going on. It had been completely out of the question to consider that the enemy might attack them. They’d been caught completely by surprise.

“Ha! Don’t you worry about the details!” Steinþórr picked up his trusty iron warhammer, kicked open (and broke) the front door of the house with a *Bam!* and practically leapt out through the doorway.

The sky was totally gray, and the rain was coming down fast in large, pelting drops that made it quite hard to see anything.

The roar of the wind and rain snuffed out any other sound.

Even so, Steinþórr’s beast-like sense of smell was able to pick up on the trace scent of a nearby battle.

“...Over that way!” he shouted.

He ran nonstop until he reached the outskirts of the village, where he could hear the splashes of people running through water and the screams of confused and fleeing soldiers.

It seemed the fighters had fallen into a complete state of panic.

That was not a totally unthinkable reaction. They had been camping out here in the cold, huddled close together for warmth, when they were suddenly attacked in that state of vulnerability.

“Mounted soldiers?!” Steinþórr caught sight of a group of soldiers on horseback chasing down his Lightning Clan fighters, and clicked his tongue in irritation. “Tch, that’s right, the Wolf Clan had some of those, too.”

So that was their game: By clearly placing their formation on the east bank of the Élivágar, it had drawn attention there. Because of the distance, it had encouraged the Lightning Clan to lower their guard. That was letting the Wolf Clan send out a small force of highly-mobile cavalry to stage a surprise attack.

Steinþórr caught sight of one fighter in particular: A girl with a slender frame that looked out of place on the field of battle. “These guys are pretty good. That silver-haired one leading them... I think her name’s Sigrún or something.”

His grip on his warhammer tightened.

It was quite rare for this man to remember the names of his foes. Steinþórr only took an interest in the very strong. Those who failed to draw his interest by those standards would never get him to remember even their names.

At the very least, this girl he saw fighting now, whirling her spear this way and that, was one of the chosen strong who remained in his memory.

The instant Sigrún made eye contact with Steinþórr, she turned to call out an order to her men in a voice that rang out clear as a bell even amongst all the commotion. “Ah! Steinþórr! Tch, it’s time to go, then. Retreat!”

“You think I’ll just let you get away?!” Steinþórr kicked into a run, and with his inhuman leg strength he closed the distance between them, aiming an upward swing of his hammer right at Sigrún’s face.

The attack contained the pure divine might of Steinþórr’s rune, Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer, making it impossible to block.

And yet—

“Wha?!” Steinþórr let out a shocked voice as the enemy’s spear attack also arced up from underneath, as if scooping up his hammer; his attack was thus pushed off-target.

His hammer swung uselessly through empty air.

Sigrún attacked in that tiny opening, bringing her spear blade back down.

“Gaah!” Steinþórr hurriedly sprang backward.

As soon as that distance opened up between the two of them, Sigrún turned her horse around, and in no time flat, she disappeared into the rain.

“I can’t believe I let her get away,” Steinþórr grumbled. “I must be losing my touch. Still, that technique she used... that’s the one that scraggly wolf uses. Heh heh, looks like she’s gotten better.”

The other riders had also completely vanished by this point.

They’d delivered casualties to his side without suffering any of their own.

Enemy or not, Steinþórr could appreciate how well they’d managed both the surprise attack and the retreat.

“I was pretty disappointed that Suoh-Yuuto’s not around anymore, but maybe I can still have some fun.” Steinþórr licked his lips and sneered, looking like a hungry tiger that had just caught sight of its prey.

The Körmt River was long and wide, and it nourished the lands from the Bifröst region all the way west to Álfheimr and Vanaheimr.

Water was necessary for human survival, and for the survival of crops. So for the people of western Yggdrasil, this great river supplied so much that it was like the source of life itself. Many referred to the Körmt River as “the Mother Körmt” or “the Great Mother.”

Hveðrungr was currently the patriarch of the Panther Clan, nomads from the lands of Miðgarðr north of the Himinbjörg Mountains, but originally he had been a Bifröst man, born and raised in Iárnviðr.

He had resolved to abandon his ties to his homeland, and yet faced with the sight of the river flowing before him, he could not deny the nostalgic feelings that rose within him.

“Hmph, acting as sentimental as a girl. I’m disgusted with myself.” Hveðrungr bitterly spat out his self-derision, and steered his thoughts elsewhere.

He wasn’t some bard; right now he was a proud general here to command a legion of soldiers. He needed to be cold and dispassionate for this.

“Still, I am sure they won’t simply let us cross for nothing.” Staring out at the Horn Clan flags presented on the distant opposite riverbank, Hveðrungr pondered his options.

After first deciding that he’d attack the Horn Clan, he had spent half a month researching the geography of this area. According to information gleaned from the locals, this area was where the river was relatively more shallow and easier to cross.

Naturally, the Horn Clan also knew that, which was exactly why they had positioned such a large formation on the opposite bank here.

If he were to move toward them carelessly, he would assuredly be met with a storm of arrows.

“We’ve had one kind of rain coming down already,” Hveðrungr mused. “For now, let’s watch and wait for another couple of days.”

The rain had cleared up by now, but it had been raining steadily until that

morning, so the river level should be higher. There was no point in trying to cross now, when it would be much more difficult.

The nomadic Panther Clan's basic battle strategy was hit-and-run, pulling back after each attack, so that they wouldn't receive any counterattacks from their enemies. When things seemed dangerous, they fled immediately.

To those cultures who lived in and defended permanent settlements, this might have come across as cowardly. But if one considered how warfare was essentially a struggle of life and death, any tactics which only sacrificed the life of the enemy were extremely logical. One should not fight a reckless battle.

"Mm?" Hveðrungr noticed a single man standing on the opposite riverbank, drawing a bow.

In order to avoid taking arrow attacks, the Panther Clan had set themselves up around one hundred meters back from the near river bank.

Taking the width of the river itself into account, that meant it was at least two hundred meters to the opposite shore...

An arrow shot perfectly into the ground at his very feet with a dull *shunk*.

"Ah! Oho..." Hveðrungr let out an impressed gasp, a rarity for him.

That man had incredible strength with the bow to have shot this far. His aim was impeccable, as well.

If Hveðrungr had not jumped backward at the last minute, the arrow would have pierced right through him.

"Hear me!" the man called. "I am Haugspori, the proud son of my patriarch Lady Linnea, and assistant to the second-in-command of the Horn Clan! These words are likely wasted on the ears of you barbaric fiends of the Panther Clan, but I will tell you that this land has been entrusted to us of the Horn Clan by our most sacred Divine Empress, and we have long guarded it. We will not suffer you to take one step onto its soil! If you persist on coming, then be prepared to feast on the hail of arrows we have ready for you!"

The man's booming voice carried to Hveðrungr's ears even across the distance. Apparently his voice was as powerful as his bow arm.

As soon as he finished speaking, the other Horn Clan soldiers broke out into a chorus of war cries.

His speech was serving to motivate his allies before the battle, pronouncing loudly and clearly their justification for fighting. Such pre-battle speeches were not uncommon.

“Well now, that was pretty smartly played.” Hveðrungr’s lips curled into a grin.

As stated before, such speeches were not uncommon, but shooting an arrow from such an incredibly far distance to visibly score a point against him like this was impressive.

That man was probably their clan’s greatest master of the bow, and so there was no need to think that any of the other fighters could replicate his feat.

However, it had still planted a seed of fear in the Panther Clan’s rank and file, fear that perhaps the Horn Clan could fire upon them even from that great distance.

“I’ve got no choice but to give him a good reply.” Hveðrungr readied his own bow, and stepped forward.

Until recently, he would have assigned this role to the Panther Clan’s greatest archer, Váli, but unfortunately Váli had been killed by the Wolf Clan during the Battle of Gashina. It was a bit of an annoyance, but Hveðrungr would have to do it himself instead.

“Þl◊ℳ.” As he finished pulling taut his trusty bow, he spoke the word of power which wove together the magical energy within him.

Hveðrungr’s rune was Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions, and it allowed him to steal any and all techniques. Obtaining skill with a bow was child’s play.

However, that didn’t mean he had the raw physical strength necessary to power an arrow shot that would cover the whole distance.

Of course, if he failed to shoot as far, it would show him to be weaker than his opponent, and his troops would lose morale.

And so he used the power of galdr song magic.

A sudden, powerful gust of wind blew from behind Hveðrungr. He released his arrow with exquisite timing, and it rode that wind.

The arrow drew a long, gentle arc across the air above the river, and fell directly toward the center of Haugspori's chest, as if being pulled straight to its target.

Of course, the man easily struck the arrow aside, but what was important was that this was sufficient for the Panther Clan to save face.

Hveðrungr set his voice upon the summoned wind, to be carried across to his enemies.

"I am the patriarch of the Panther Clan, ruler of the great grasslands, Hveðrungr! You manage to bark loudly enough for weaklings whom we toyed with so easily last year! Your precious friends the Wolf Clan won't be coming to your aid this time! Go ahead and flee now, if you value your lives!"

His voices echoed much louder and more powerfully in their ears than to even his own men nearby.

This was how the curtain opened onto what was to be called the Battle of Körmt River.

ACT 6

“Huaaaah...” Mitsuki sat up in her bed, yawning and stretching.

She was getting up from a good long rest, but she still felt the weight of fatigue that hadn’t fully left her.

Compared to the modern world, beds in this era weren’t as good to sleep on... but that wasn’t the reason. She’d already long since gotten used to that.

No, the real problem that caused her to wake up tired was...

“Even while I’m sleeping, I’m training the whole time with Lady Rífa. I don’t feel like I slept at all...” Mitsuki rubbed her tired eyes and sighed deeply.

Only two weeks remained until the night of the next full moon. There wasn’t much time. She had to push herself, even if it was a little reckless to her health.

“Mitsuki 𐀀𐀁𐀂𐀃𐀄, 𐀅𐀆𐀇 𐀈𐀉𐀊𐀋𐀌.” Felicia’s voice came from outside the bedroom door, which soon opened.

A smile blossomed on Mitsuki’s face as soon as she saw her. It was evidence that the two of them had really opened up to each other over the course of the past week.

“Oh, just one second, please.” Mitsuki closed her eyes, and took a long, deep breath. She focused her mind on the power within her.

When she opened her eyes again, the pair of golden symbols glowed within them.

“♪～～!” She threaded the magical power into her voice and traced a certain melody. “There we go. Good morning, Felicia.”

“...Good morning. It seems you have fully mastered the ‘Connections’ galdr, and in the span of just one week. Honestly, I fear I may lose confidence in my own abilities.”

Felicia placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. She followed it quickly with another smile, though; it was easy to see that she was only joking.

“It’s because I have a good teacher!” Mitsuki smiled. “And you’re willing to

work with me from morning to night, after all.”

Mitsuki had indeed spent almost every waking (and sleeping) moment the past week training to control her power.

She worked with Felicia in her waking hours, and with Rífa in her dreams, receiving thorough instruction from both of them.

Thanks to that, Mitsuki could now freely call forth the twin runes in her eyes, and she had reached the point where she was able to manage simple galdr spells, too.

“You are still progressing at an astounding pace,” Felicia said. “At this rate, we may very well succeed.”

“But complacency is the greatest enemy! We can’t fail next time, no matter what.” Mitsuki clenched her fists in front of her, psyching herself up.

When Mitsuki had first told the others that she’d met Rífa in her dreams and secured her cooperation in summoning Yuuto, they had all half-doubted her.

Of course, the fact that they had also half-believed her was something to be grateful for.

If this had been the modern world with its culture of pure science, such a fantastical story would have simply been laughed off.

This was one area where it really made a difference that Yggdrasil was a world with Einherjar and galdr and seiðr, and various other mysterious phenomena.

Eventually, as Mitsuki began to get control over her power, the people who had doubted her at first gradually began to switch to placing their trust and expectations with her. This was especially true because she so closely resembled Rífa.

And so now, Mitsuki was spending her days doing her best to deal with the heavy pressure of the entire Wolf Clan’s expectations.

“Hee hee, you are quite right,” Felicia said. “In that case, why don’t we get right to your training once breakfast is over?”

“Yes! Thank you very much!” Mitsuki said.

“Phewww! I’m so tired...!” Letting out a groan, Mitsuki flopped down onto the table she was sitting at.

She was on a terrace which overlooked the inner courtyard of the palace. It was well-lit by the sun and had become one of Mitsuki’s favorite places.

In the world of fantasy video games, the trope was that magic users were physically weak, but Yggdrasil’s seiðr magics actually required lots of physical stamina. It was pretty much all dancing and singing, after all.

Her physical training started with at least an hour of running, followed by muscle exercises like push-ups and crunches, and then flexibility exercises and voice training. All together, it was a lot like the training for professional stage actors.

Mitsuki had been in the gardening club in middle school, and the only real athletics she’d done were normal gym classes, so this was all pretty rough on her. She was finally getting used to it all now, but at the beginning, she’d suffered from terrible muscle pains.

“Thank you for your hard work again today, Lady Mitsuki,” a young girl said. “Here is your milk and date juice.”

“Oh, thank you, Ephy! ♥” Mitsuki accepted the glass from Ephelia and downed it right away.

Juice from the date palm fruit was incredibly sweet on its own, so Mitsuki preferred to drink it mixed with milk to soften the flavor.

It was a drink that digested quickly and was high in nutrition, so it was perfect for a tired body.

“Lunch for today is vegetable soup and grilled salmon,” Ephelia added.

“Wow, it looks so tasty!” Mitsuki quickly placed her hands together and said the traditional *itadakimasu*, before digging in to the food at a rapid pace.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” as the famous saying went, but for Mitsuki, two meals a day just wasn’t enough. She’d only just come here recently from a three-meals lifestyle, and was working hard all day, so her body might not be able to hold out with just a meal in the morning and evening.

“Hee hee, Big Sister Mitsuki, it seems like your stomach is holding up just fine, after all,” Felicia said, sitting casually in a chair beside her. “That was my biggest concern for you, and I am so happy to see it was unnecessary.”

“Ohhh, yeah, now that you mention it...”

Apparently when Yuuto had first come to Yggdrasil, for a good while, the food hadn’t agreed with his stomach, and he’d been very ill. But Mitsuki hadn’t had any stomach issues as of yet, so it seemed she had nothing to worry about in that regard.

Maybe she had a stronger stomach than Yuuto, or perhaps it had something to do with the mysterious power dwelling in the runes in her eyes.

Either way, it was good enough for her that it didn’t look like she’d need to use the stomach medicine packed into the backpack she’d brought.

Her days and nights were packed with multiple sessions of training and studying, so meals were one of her only chances to wind down and relax. If she’d had to worry about health problems brought on by meals here, the stress would likely have driven her off the deep end.

The soup was delicious, with a flavor she felt she could really get addicted to. The broth tasted like it could use a little bit more salt, but the vegetables were sweeter and their unique flavors stronger than the ones in the modern world.

Mitsuki had read on the internet that, thanks to all the chemicals used in modern farming, vegetables had come to have less flavor and nutrition than they used to long ago. These meals were the type of experience that made her believe it must be true.

The salmon did taste like it could use a little more salt, but it was a fish caught that very morning, far fresher than what she could have bought at the supermarket in her hometown.

The milk mixed in with the date juice she’d just had was also freshly milked.

Her lunch might look simple at first glance, but to someone from modern Japan, one could see it as quite the luxurious meal.

Mitsuki, certainly, had grown quite fond of the food and cooking of Yggdrasil.

“Mm, but you know, I really still do want white rice...” she murmured.

“Ahaha! Yuuto always said the same thing,” Ingrid chimed in from the seat across the table. “Is that rice stuff really that good?” she added, clearly interested.

If she’d heard Yuuto mention it that many times, it was no surprise that she was curious about how good it tasted.

“Mm... well, it’s not like rice itself is super delicious on its own or anything, it’s more like... having it with your meal makes the other food taste better.”

“Huh, really? Hearing it described like that makes me really want to try it.”

“Oh, well, I did bring a small amount with me when I came here. So once things settle down a bit, I’ll treat you all to some.”

After a short, silent pause, Ingrid flashed a bright smile. “...I’m looking forward to that.”

Talking with her like this, Mitsuki felt like Ingrid’s easy-to-talk-to personality reminded her a bit of Ruri. But she still had an air about her befitting the sixth-ranked officer of the Wolf Clan.

Considering the severity of the situation the Wolf Clan was in right now, it was probably hard for her to be cheerful and optimistic.

“These lovely girl-only get-togethers have gotten a lot more lonely.” Mitsuki looked over at the empty chairs at the table. “I want us all to be able to do things as cheerfully as before — no, not just us, I want to include Linnea too.”

Sigrún and the Claw Clan twins had left Íárnviðr five days earlier to act against the encroaching forces of the Lightning Clan.

It was possible that they might be engaged in battle with the Lightning Clan already. That thought filled Mitsuki with worry for them.

It was a feeling she’d faced so many times with Yuuto, but she’d never really got used to it.

The battles this time were expected to be particularly fierce, and all she could do was pray fervently that they made it home in one piece.

After lunch, Mitsuki resumed her special training with Felicia.

Her training in the morning was all focused on the fundamentals and improving her physical stamina, while the afternoon session was all about practicing actual techniques.

They conducted lessons in the hörgr at the top of the Hliðskjálf tower itself, having concluded that it would be best to train in the same location where they would be performing the actual rite.

The religious atmosphere inside the sanctuary hall added to Mitsuki's energy and focus.

"Fa, Fagra, himn, fibulr..." Mitsuki stammered over the words. Energy and focus weren't enough to bend reality to her will.

"Incorrect. Not 'fibulr,' but ǪIMǼNÍ."

"Right!"

The incantations for a seiðr ritual all needed to be recited in the language of Yggdrasil.

And they had to be done while performing a dance, so using a cheat sheet to help was out of the question. Rote memorization was the only option.

But, for a Japanese girl like Mitsuki, the words sounded like nothing more than lines of meaningless syllables. That made it difficult for her to remember them.

She had trouble with the pronunciations, too.

And these incantations added up to three whole minutes. Even just remembering all of that was a really exhausting task.

She continuously repeated the incantations, over and over, until the sun set.

"I think we should leave off here for today," Felicia said at last. "You did wonderfully."

"Th-thank you very much." Mitsuki only barely managed to finish a proper thank-you before collapsing to the ground. Her whole body felt heavy and sluggish.

So this is why people in the Drama Club call themselves an athletic club, she thought tiredly.

“All right... I’m gonna go ahead and call Yuu-kun.” Mitsuki pulled out her smartphone and, with unsteady steps, made her way over to a corner of the room.

This was technically a call with her boyfriend, so she would feel embarrassed to have another person listening in.

She turned back one last time to confirm that she was far enough away from Felicia before calling Yuuto’s number.

“Hello?” Yuuto asked.

“It’s Mitsuki. Good evening, Yuu-kun!”

“Hey, good evening. How are you doing?”

“Ugh, I’m so worn ouuut! But I guess you could say things are going well? Felicia and Lady Rífa said that, at this rate, it might work.”

“I see... that’s great. This is all happening so fast, though, like... it still doesn’t feel real. Who’d have thought you were a twin-rune Einherjar, right?”

“Ahaha! I think I’m still the one who has the most trouble believing it. Before I came to Yggdrasil, I was nothing more than your average, ordinary high school girl...”

“Hold on,” Yuuto objected. “Calling you ‘average and ordinary’? That’s an insult to all the normal high school girls out there.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Kidding, just kidding. Well, half-kidding.”

“So then you’re half serious.” Mitsuki’s voice turned cold and rough.

Of course, her tone of voice was also meant as a joke. Partly.

“No, but seriously, you waited *three whole years* for me to come back, and then decided to go to Yggdrasil with me. I know just how big-hearted you are,” Yuuto said. “Felicia even said something to me about it! ‘As expected of the woman Big Brother selected. She is truly the one worthy of being the wife of a

ruler.’ You should have seen my face. And then, when I heard about what you said *after* that, giving your official approval to affairs... I had trouble closing my jaw after that one.”

“Th-that was... I did research on wives from the Warring States period, and thought a lot about everything, and so...”

“You’re overthinking it, though. I’m loyal to you, and you only.”

“Yeah. I know that I’m the person you love the most. But the person you love the *second most* is Felicia, right?”

“.....”

“I’ll interpret silence as admitting to it.”

“N-no, wait, hold on. Now, um...”

Yuuto began to stammer and panic, causing Mitsuki to chuckle.

“Look, I’m not trying to attack you or blame you or anything. She’s a beautiful woman, and she looked after your needs, both work and personal, for so long. I think it would be impossible to ask you not to have felt anything for her.”

“But I still chose *you*. And you gave up so much, just to be together with me. I have a responsibility to...”

“Yuu-kun, you have a responsibility to think of your clan first, not me,” Mitsuki stated flatly. “Because you’re their patriarch.”

She continued:

“For example... If you took Linnea, or Al and Kris, as wives, that would deepen relations between the clans, right?”

“...Well, yeah, it would.”

“And keep in mind I’m not planning to give up the seat of ‘first wife and queen’ to anyone, of course. But if you did that, if you took in girls from other clans as secondary wives and the like, that would be a huge benefit to the Wolf Clan. Does that scenario make sense?”

“.....” Once more, Yuuto was silent in a way that served as tacit admittance. Then, he gave a long sigh. “Are you *really* sure you’d be okay with something

like that?”

“If you really will always love me most of all, then yes.”

“...You really, really are too good for me. I don’t deserve a wife like you.”

“Well then, you’d better treat me right.” Mitsuki said this last statement in an almost playful manner. But the tone of voice in the reply that came back to her was almost grimly serious.

“Yeah, I will, no matter what. ...I love you.”

“And he actually said that—! Aaaah!” Mitsuki exclaimed. “When I heard that, I got so emotional, I thought I was going to pass out!”

“O-oh, I see. That’s wonderful.” Rífa physically pulled back, overwhelmed by Mitsuki, who was jumping around excitedly as she talked.

The two of them were once again in the familiar garden of white flowers.

Mitsuki, for her part, seemed to pay no notice to how Rífa was reacting.

“Isn’t it, though?! Yuu-kun is a pretty old-fashioned kind of guy, you know, so I was so sure he wasn’t ever going to say ‘I love you’ to me at all. I figured if I ever heard it, it would be on his deathbed or something. But to think I’d get to hear it this same year! I was all, ‘That’s it, I have no more regrets...’”

“Oh, will you just be quiet already!” Rífa snapped. “You were so intent on asking me to hear you out that I thought it was something important, and what do I get but your foolish bragging about your love life! It’s enough to make me sick!”

Rífa finished shouting and puffed up one of her cheeks, still obviously angry.



She was at the very end of her patience, it would appear.

However, considering that she had spent her whole life doted on as the center of attention, perhaps there was something to be said for the fact that she had held out for this long.

“Didn’t you come here to train so that we could summon Yuuto?!” she snapped. “We don’t have the time to waste on idle chatter!”

“Y-yes, that’s true...”

“Good, then let’s get back to practicing the incantation for Mistilteinn.”

“Right!”

The training session that day was a good deal tougher than usual.

It was uncertain whether that was due, in part, to jealousy.

“Fire, fire, fire! Unleash everything you can!” Sigrún screamed, spurring on her men, as she herself aimed her bow and arrow at an enemy and let loose.

The bow she was using was a new model, which Ingrid had made over the winter for Sigrún and the members of her special forces.

The common sort of bow used in Yggdrasil was crescent-shaped, but these new bows had a shape like a pair of mountains joined at the middle.

According to Yuuto, this shape provided a stronger pull on the bowstring, increasing the power of the arrows.

Thanks to that, even though these bows were kept small so they could be used on horseback, they shot farther than normal bows, and they were easier to wield, too.

As the Lightning Clan soldiers began to transition into a counterattack and press forward, Sigrún swiftly gave the order to retreat. “Ghh. All right, pull back!”

However, in a rare showing from the elite members of her unit, the men were slow to react.

That delay gave time for the Lightning Clan troops to close the distance.

“Rrraaagh! I’ll kill you all!”

“Did you really think you could face us and win with such small numbers?!”

The Lightning Clan soldiers pressed forward with even more ferocity.

In a field battle like this, the most kills and captures always came from attacking your enemy as they retreated.

The vast majority of the soldiers had been drafted into the army by decree, but they were still eager to earn rewards for military achievements that would make a fair price for risking death in battle.

Enemy kills could earn rewards from one’s patriarch, not to mention that the enemy’s weapons and personal belongings could be seized for oneself and sold later.

Right now, the attacking soldiers were convinced without a doubt that this was the perfect chance to make their fortunes.

“Looks like they took the bait,” Sigrún murmured to herself, and kicked her horse into a faster run. She then slid her upper body into a position facing backward, and began to fire.

The Múspell forces under her command all followed her lead, and launched arrow after arrow.

It was the technique of their hated enemy, the mounted archers of the Panther Clan — the Parthian shot.

In the fall of the previous year, the Wolf Clan had suffered at the hands of the Parthian shot tactic, so over the course of the past winter, they had trained themselves furiously in its use for themselves.

Their execution of it was of course still quite imperfect compared to the clan they’d copied it from, but their enemies here had let their guard down.

The Lightning Clan soldiers fell prey to the arrows so easily, it was almost comical.

And yet, still they did not halt their pursuit.

Though the Wolf Clan special forces were using this technique to deliberately

draw the enemy toward themselves, from their enemy's perspective, it still looked like they were fleeing.

So, rather than falter, the Lightning Clan soldiers hounded the Wolf Clan riders with even more energy.

They were serving themselves up on a silver platter.

Lure the enemy close, then fire and flee. Lure, and fire. Sigrún's unit repeated this process over and over.

They eventually expended all of their arrows; and, having managed to deal a satisfactory number of casualties, it was time to pull out.

That was when it happened.

A single rider on horseback came charging out from within the Lightning Clan troops, leaving a huge cloud of dust in his wake.

Even from far away, Sigrún could make out the fiery red of the rider's hair, and she shuddered.

"We're leaving!" she shouted. "Retreat at full speed!"

At her command, the special forces all spurred their trusty horses into a full run, leaning their bodies forward and focusing only on making the escape.

They moved at an incredible speed, incomparable to their pretend "fleeing" earlier, and in the blink of an eye, the Lightning Clan troops fell out of sight behind them.

However, Steinþórr himself still remained hot on their heels. Far from being left behind, he was gaining on them by the second.

"Khh... he's so fast!" Sigrún grimaced bitterly as she glanced behind her.

The enemy's top commander had charged forward to chase them alone, without any allies or protection. Normally, this would be a golden opportunity. However, common sense was useless against this foe — Steinþórr, the superhuman warrior without peer.

If she were to attack him now along with all three hundred of her elite special forces soldiers, she *did* think there was a good chance she could win. But it

would unmistakably come at the cost of enormous casualties on her side.

Of course, there was enough value in killing him to make even that price worth it. The problem was that, in all likelihood, before they managed to wear him down enough to finish him off, his troops would catch up with them again. That was the most predictable outcome, and it would render all of their losses completely pointless.

Of course, at this rate, it was only a matter of time before he caught up to them anyway.

“Come on... come on... where is it...?!” Sigrún muttered to herself, almost like a chant, unable to suppress her impatience.

It should be just a little farther ahead.

Every passing second felt hopelessly long.

“Guaah!” A cry came from behind her, a man’s dying scream.

One of the members of her unit had fallen behind, and Steinþórr had reached him.

“Rrgh...! How much farther?!” A gleam of light hit Sigrún’s eyes — the reflection of sunlight off of water. “Ah! There it is!”

A river came into full view, its water a dirty gray-brown. It was the Élivágar, the river that had formerly been the border between the Wolf and Lightning Clan territories.

“Forward! We’re going in!” Immediately, she barked the order.

One after the other, her riders leapt their horses into the river with a heavy *splash!* and pressed forward through the water.

Their speed dropped visibly, as the current took its toll on their footing.

This spelled the perfect opportunity for Steinþórr. However, he pulled back firmly on the reins of his horse and came to a sudden stop, refusing to approach the water’s edge.

His behavior was only natural.

It was during the Battle of Élivágar River, indeed at this very river, where

raging floodwaters had given Steinþórr the very first defeat of his life.

He was a man who always charged relentlessly forward, but in this moment, he could do naught but hesitate.

And so, the Múspell Special Forces Unit escaped Steinþórr's pursuit.

That evening, after Steinþórr had regrouped with his main army, he found himself enduring a storm of a different kind.

"How many times... *how many times* must I tell you before you will listen?! Do not! Charge! Ahead! Alone!"

Þjálfi's shouts came down on him like thunderbolts, broken up by small pauses for breath.

Despite having shouted himself breathless, he still looked like he had a lot more he wanted to say. Anger seemed to radiate off of his whole body like steam, and it was enough to make even the rough and rowdy Lightning Clan soldiers tremble as they watched from a distance.

But Steinþórr himself didn't seem to be bothered one bit. He idly picked at some dirt in his ear with a finger.

"*Father!*" Þjálfi screamed.

"Hey, you don't have to shout so loud. I can hear you just fine. But come on, I didn't have a choice."

"*How*, exactly, did you not have a choice?!"

"Look, if I hadn't done that, we would have ended up with a lot more dead and injured than what we got, right?"

"Nngh." Þjálfi frowned, and didn't answer.

The Wolf Clan cavalry's attack had killed close to a hundred members of the Lightning Clan, leaving several times that number of injured.

"I helped us out by chasing those guys over to the other side of the river. Now they know they can't try that crap with us anymore, right?"

"Rrrrgh...!" Þjálfi felt his teeth grinding.

He wanted to lash out angrily, but *couldn't*. He had nowhere to direct his

anger, and it contorted his face.

What Steinþórr had done was beyond foolish; it had been downright idiotic. But it had produced results. Lightning Clan casualties had been kept to a minimum.

That was how things usually went with this young man.

Þjálfi was still only twenty-nine, but recently he'd noticed his hairline was starting to recede, and he was absolutely certain it was because of the stress caused by this thoughtless, self-centered sworn father of his.

"Ohh yeah, one more thing," Steinþórr added, as if he'd just remembered something.

"What is it?"

"Those guys went right across the river, just like normal. Pretty weird when there was all that heavy rain yesterday and the day before."

"I see... that certainly is strange. We should have the area upriver searched beginning first thing tomorrow morning."

"You catch on fast. This is why I like having you around, man. It makes things so much easier for me."

Þjálfi snorted and shrugged his shoulders. "Meanwhile, being around you only causes me all sorts of headaches."

After such heavy rains, the river should have been running significantly higher and faster. The fact that the enemy had crossed so easily was suspicious, even if one accounted for them being on horseback.

"I would think it's most likely they've set something up... Still, they must take us for idiots. Even if this is you we are talking about, do they seriously think they can make the same trick work twice?"

"Wait," Steinþórr began. "I'm pretty sure that means you called me an idiot just now."

"Just your imagination, Father," Þjálfi replied smoothly.

It was a lie, of course, but considering what Þjálfi had to go through, perhaps

that much should be forgiven.

Steinþórr didn't seem to pay it any further mind, and continued. "Well, yeah, I don't think they seriously expect that we'll fall for that trap again. They probably just did it in hope of the off chance that we will."

"Ah, that makes sense. And putting it that way, quite impressive of them. In order to dam the river, the sandbags and laborers necessary would require quite a substantial amount of funds and preparation. Perhaps all the more so this time, since they likely did this on short notice."

Even if the Wolf Clan had seen enormous profits from trade in their glasswares, that sort of expense couldn't have been trivial to them.

For a strategy that would completely drive off or wipe out their enemies, then of course it would be a cheap price to pay, but if it didn't provide any results, all of that money and labor would come to nothing.

Steinþórr chuckled. "Heh, that just shows that our enemy isn't afraid to show how desperate they are. They've lost Suoh-Yuuto, and they're backed into a corner. Maybe this is all they've got left?"

Meanwhile, the rare consecutive days of heavy rain had also caused the Körmt River's waters to rise, effectively holding back the Panther Clan's advance.

For a time, at least, the Horn Clan had the heavens themselves on their side. However, the Panther Clan remained camped near the southern bank of the river.

Five days passed, and that period of good fortune came to its end.

"The water level's come down..." said Haugspori, the Horn Clan's assistant second-in-command, glowering as he peered out at the Körmt River. "They could come at us at any point now."

His gaze traveled up the far riverbank to the ranks of Panther Clan troops waiting there, and he nervously scratched the back of his head with one hand.

He'd gotten orders from his patriarch Linnea to hold back the Panther Clan at the river's edge, but that was going to be pretty tough to do.

After all, the enemy had three times the number of soldiers.

If they relied on that overwhelming size difference and attacked with their full force all at once, the Horn Clan side frankly wouldn't have any real way of stopping them.

Of course, the chance of the Panther Clan trying such a brute force method was probably pretty low. They would be loath to throw away a huge number of their own men's lives just to cross this point, after all.

"If either one of us shows an opening, it'll all come loose in a second..." Haugspori muttered to himself.

Two armies, both ready in formation, staring each other down silently. This was a common situation with large field battles.

The key to this silent "battle before the battle" was in whether one could maintain one's own troop morale and injure the enemy's.

A prolonged stalemate depressed morale, as did bouts of bad weather like they'd just seen.

Furthermore, when the enemy's forces had a clear advantage, maintaining morale with that knowledge was a difficult task all its own.

Almost all of the soldiers here were recruits drafted into service from the population; typically the second or third sons of farmers and the like. One couldn't simply demand that such men fight and die for their nation with fearless loyalty.

If their fortunes took a bad turn, those men would likely flee.

Seamless coordination and discipline, like that shown by the Wolf Clan troops, was totally abnormal by common standards.

Standing on the other bank, a masked man was glaring back in his direction, watching.

"Damn! Even from far away, the sight of that guy creeps me out," Haugspori muttered. Suddenly, he got the sensation that something was wrong. "Hm?"

One of the most important things to an archer is good vision. As the Horn Clan's greatest archer, Haugspori also had the best eyes in the clan.

That was why he was able to realize what was happening.

However, he was just a little too late.

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack! Armed riders, approaching us from the west!”

“Heh heh, they fell right for it.” Hveðrungr smirked as he raced his horse alongside the bank of the Körmt River — the northern bank.

The man who had been standing so brazenly in full view on the southern riverbank was a total imposter, a man with similar build and hair whom Hveðrungr had made to wear a mask just like his own.

So infamous was Hveðrungr’s appearance that in the western lands of Yggdrasil, he was already known by the moniker Grímnir, the Masked Lord. Because of that, anyone who saw a person wearing his black iron mask would assume it was him. He’d simply used that fact to his advantage.

With “Hveðrungr” and the majority of the army he commanded standing visible on the shore, watching for an opening, the Horn Clan would of course have no choice but to devote their full attention to them.

And by drawing their attention toward his main force and his fake, the real Hveðrungr had been able to take three thousand riders with him in a separate unit, make their way to a different crossing point, and take their time fording the river.

Crossing had still been somewhat difficult, but without the added threat of Horn Clan troops, that was hardly an issue.

And once they were across, there would be no more to fear.

The Horn Clan was formed up facing off against the Panther Clan forces on the far shore, and so their unprotected flank was exposed.

“Heh heh, we’ll wipe them out in one fell swoop!” Hveðrungr thrust his hand forward, signaling his men to charge.

“Rrraaaaaaghh!!”

The Panther Clan riders let out a loud war cry and raced at full charge toward the Horn Clan with ferocious speed.

At that point, they assumed that all that remained was for them to overwhelm and wipe out their enemies in a one-sided massacre.

However...

From deep within the Horn Clan ranks came a loud rumbling sound. It was the ominous rumbling of scores of heavy wagon wheels.

“Ngh! The wagon wall?!” Hveðrungr clicked his tongue in irritation. “Tch... How could they have acquired that many of them on their own?!”

He hadn’t anticipated in the slightest that they’d have this prepared.

Thus far, Hveðrungr’s appraisal of Linnea had been anything but favorable. He had, in short, completely discounted her capabilities.

That assessment had been, in a way, inevitable. Linnea’s skill in military matters was absolutely mediocre, if one were to look only at the results of her battles.

She’d attacked the Wolf Clan with twice their troop strength and lost spectacularly, and afterward she’d been unable to do anything to stop the incursions of the Panther Clan, even losing fortified cities like Myrkviðr and Sylgr to them.

Despite being the ruler of the nation right next to Steinþórr’s, she couldn’t even merit his remembering her name.

During the Panther Clan’s invasion, and even earlier during the Hoof Clan’s invasion, she had only defended her nation’s survival thanks to the protection of the Wolf Clan.

That was why Hveðrungr had assumed he would be able to defeat her with all the ease of a tiger swatting away a cub.

But...

“Damn it,” he spat in frustration, “Hold, men, hold, hold! Withdraw for now!” He turned his horse around.

This detached force he was currently leading didn’t have enough manpower to break through the wagon fortress defense.

“I guess even a second-rate patriarch is still a patriarch,” he grumbled. “So she was at least worthy of reaching her position, then.”

The wagon carriages used in the wagon wall were specially reinforced with iron plates, and so even one such carriage must have been quite expensive to create.

Even if the knowledge from Yuuto had made its production possible, iron was still very, very expensive. And the Horn Clan would have been importing the materials from the Wolf Clan, so that would make the production price even higher.

In just half a year, the Horn Clan had *mass produced* them. Linnea had fully grasped the military value of the wagon wall defense, and even as her nation was struggling in its weakened political state, she had found a way to raise the money to cover the enormous budget necessary. That was not the work of a mediocre ruler.

Hveðrungr would have to completely rethink his invasion strategy.

After the detached force of Panther Clan riders successfully escaped some distance from the battlefield area, they found a nearby farming village and attacked it, capturing both food supplies and a place to set up base.

The corpses of murdered residents lay strewn haphazardly here and there, and from various places outside the village, one could hear the wails and screams of women.

Let us take, for example, Uesugi Kenshin, who is regarded in Japanese history as an example of a righteous and heroic general: It is said that upon entering enemy territory, even he would aggressively plunder the villages of their autumn harvests and capture the locals for sale as slaves.

Inhumane though it may be, pillaging reduces the resources and strength of an enemy country while simultaneously sustaining one's own army; two birds with one stone. Thus, it has always been a legitimate part of military strategy, even being recommended by Sun Tzu.

“Still, it seems they have gotten one over on us.” The Panther Clan general Narfi sighed and shook his head. “I would never have thought *they* would have

those ‘wagon fortresses’ prepared against us...”

He was a slender man with clean-cut and delicately handsome features, which made him stand out among the men of the Panther Clan, who typically looked more wild, virile, and tough.

However, in contrast to his somewhat weak appearance, he was an Einherjar with the rune of Hrímfaxi, the Frostmane, and the third strongest fighter in the Panther Clan.

“What shall we do, then? We cannot exactly use brute strength to break our way through, as Uncle Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan might do. And I believe having our men infiltrate their formation in disguise, like we did at Gashina, will be a bit difficult this time.”

“Hmph, true, breaking through that defensive wall is no meager feat,” said Hveðrungr, sitting across from Narfi with a frustrated look on his face. He shrugged. “Even if we were to coordinate with our main forces on the southern riverbank and launch a pincer attack, we might still get repelled by their defenses anyway.”

Narfi silently nodded.

During their previous battle in Náströnd, they had attacked the Wolf Clan’s wagon wall with twice the number of troops and had been totally defeated without even being able to inflict significant losses on their enemy.

They had three times the number of troops as their enemy right now, but even with that, it seemed clear that rushing in headfirst without a plan would just lead to history repeating itself.

“However, that doesn’t mean there’s no solution,” Hveðrungr announced.

“Ohh, as expected of you, Father. So what sort of method do you have in mind?” Narfi was inwardly struck by how impressive it was that this man was managing to think of one clever trick after another to break through that seemingly impenetrable wagon wall defense.

“A long time ago, I heard this from a certain person: Apparently, fighting a hundred battles and winning each one is *not* the ideal result as a commander.”

“Well now, winning every single battle you fight sounds like a wonderful thing to me,” Narfi objected.

“Would you believe it? Apparently, the greatest victory is to defeat your enemy without ever having to fight them.” Hveðrungr sneered and chuckled to himself quietly.

Narfi knew that whenever Hveðrungr smiled in this way, it was always when he’d come up with a particularly evil idea.

In that moment, Narfi truly felt pity for his enemies in the Horn Clan.

ACT 7

With a crushing roar, the raging floodwaters surged downriver.

Due to the multiple days of rain, the massive volume of water dwarfed even the previous flood.

Neither a great mass of soldiers nor a singularly peerless warrior could hope to withstand its destructive force. All would perish equally within those waters.

That was, of course, only in the event that they were actually caught up in them.

“Haaaahhh...” Ginnar let out a miserable-sounding sigh as he watched from within the Wolf Clan ranks.

Ginnar had originally been a merchant with experience traveling throughout the many lands of this realm. Yuuto had recognized his talents and expertise, and had brought him in as a member of the Wolf Clan.

Ginnar was the one in charge of the construction of the river levee this time around.

From his vantage point, he could see the Lightning Clan troops on the far side of the river, also watching the waters from a safe distance away.

The last time this trap had been sprung, it had caught the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr and several thousand of his men, taking them all out in one fell swoop. But this time, it hadn't managed to harm even one enemy soldier.

Of course, that only made sense when one considered that the ones who'd broke the dam and set off the flood were the Lightning Clan themselves.

“All the silver we invested in this, and now it was all for nothing...”

The project he had toiled so hard to complete had just collapsed without producing results, meaning all of his efforts had been futile. There is nothing in this life which saps a person's strength and empties their heart more than that.

Ginnar could hardly bring himself to accept the reality of it. He just stood there, staring out at the surging, muddy waters with regret in his eyes.

“It wasn’t for nothing.” From behind Ginnar came a low, chilly voice.

Ginnar timidly turned around to see a man standing there who looked almost like a specter of Death.

The man’s cheeks were sunken and hollow, and his skin was a sickly pale. Only his eyes shone with a keen light and vitality at odds with the rest of him.

Frankly speaking, his ominous appearance made Ginnar uneasy.

This man’s name was Skáviðr, and he was the Wolf Clan’s assistant to the second-in-command, a man of great reputation and authority. Skáviðr was acting in Yuuto’s place as the commander of the Wolf Clan army in the field.

“It took them a day of searching to find the upstream dam, and it will take another day for the floodwaters to recede. That’s two days their advance has been halted,” Skáviðr said calmly. “Right now, if it will buy the Wolf Clan even a small amount of extra time, money is no object.”

“Until Yuuto can successfully return to Yggdrasil, hold back the Lightning Clan by whatever means necessary.” That was the mission Skáviðr had been given.

It was certainly true that things were looking bad for the Wolf Clan right now. Even so, Skáviðr believed without a doubt that Yuuto would be able to save them somehow.

“Yes, but the new moon was four nights ago,” Ginnar said, his brow furrowing. “We still have twelve more days until it’s full again.”

Just twelve more days. A short time, yet so long.

If anyone but Steinþórr had been the enemy commander, it would have been a manageable amount of time.

If worse came to worst, the Wolf Clan could have barricaded themselves within Gimlé and held out against a siege for that long, at least.

However, with the power of Mjøltnir, the Shatterer, at his disposal, Steinþórr could smash open the thick city gates with ease.

The strong, solid walls built with time and care around the city might as well have no meaning at all.

His existence so flew in the face of sense that it was unfair, through and through.

“Hey, the weather’s lookin’ pretty good.” Steinþórr sat atop his horse, staring out at the morning sun as it rose from behind the distant Þrúðvangr Mountains. His lips curled into a grin. “Perfect day for a battle.”

Yesterday, the rampaging waters of the Élivágar had finished receding, and the river was finally back to its normal state.

The wind was also fairly strong, and blowing from west to east. That would cut down on the speed and power of the enemy’s arrows.

This was, indeed, the perfect day to attack.

“Heh, looks like everybody’s ready to go,” he added, glancing behind him.

His soldiers were standing in orderly ranks, fully armed and armored, their weapons held at the ready.

Their faces looked ready for battle, too: They were filled with intense spirit.

“All right, you guys, let’s do this!” Steinþórr hollered. “Follow me!”

And he raised his great iron warhammer up high, whipping his horse into a run.

“RRRAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!”

Like a massive peal of thunder after a bolt of lightning, the war cry of the Lightning Clan troops reverberated throughout the crowd. Following Steinþórr’s lead, one after another they surged into the Élivágar River.

From the opposite bank came the telltale sound of countless bows being fired, and a storm of arrows flew toward the Lightning Clan troops.

The soldiers held up their thick wooden shields and hunkered down behind them as the arrows rained down.

Several unfortunate souls were unable to defend themselves completely. As arrows pierced their bodies, they collapsed forward with a splash into the water.

But these were the fighters of the Lightning Clan, known for their bold spirit

and daring. What's more, their patriarch himself was leading them onward from the front. An obstacle of this level would not halt their advance.

The water sloshed around their legs as they planted each firm step in the riverbed. Step by step, unfaltering, the troops steadily made their way across the river.

At last, Steinþórr's trusty steed stepped up onto the far shore. One after another, the men of the vanguard ranks followed behind him.

The sound of bronze gongs echoed loudly from throughout the Wolf Clan formation.

Following that signal, the archer units on the Wolf Clan front lines split into two groups, which quickly retreated backward toward each flank.

From the opening between the retreating archers marched forth a tightly packed formation of soldiers, armed with spears each twice as long as a man's height.

"There's that longspear unit they always use," Steinþórr remarked.

Those spears were so absurdly long that they were unwieldy, and pretty much useless in single combat. But used like this in a formation battle, the formation itself became a groundbreakingly powerful weapon.

By packing their soldiers tightly together, it created a "wall of spears" — they attacked as one so that it was difficult to block or evade, and they did so from outside the reach of a normal soldier's spear. It was a real problem.

But Steinþórr had already defeated them once before. While they might be a pain to deal with, they were still no match for him.

All the same, he did not charge at them straight away, and instead studied the enemy's movements carefully. This was quite the rare move for the man who always rushed in recklessly.

"Hmph," he said after a moment. "It doesn't look like they're trying to trap me in quicksand like they did with that formation at Gashina."

During that battle, he had cut his way into the enemy ranks at a seeming advantage, only to find that they'd used their formation to surround and trap

him on all sides. Along with being swallowed up in the flood trap a year earlier, that sort of experience had become a bit traumatic for him.

Because of that, he was now stopping to think for a moment whenever he was about to charge into the enemy with his men.

If one looked at the way he had immediately given chase to the Wolf Clan a few days earlier, charging after them alone, it might at first seem like his actions were the height of foolishness. However, that was because he had been *alone*. He believed that he himself would be able to fight his way out of any situation, but didn't want to risk harm to his troops, and that had been the basis for his decision.

"Okay, no problems, then." Steinþórr licked his lips in anticipation. "Just need to make sure not to let my guard down."

In an ironic twist for the Wolf Clan, this man's defeat twice at their hands had changed him. He had learned to think about his actions in battle, causing him to grow remarkably as a commander.

"Good grief. They could have hesitated at least a little," Skáviðr said with a sigh.

The Lightning Clan troops were charging his way, leaving clouds of dust in their wake, and he had just caught sight of the familiar shock of red hair at their head.

Skáviðr had already heard the details of the Battle of Gashina from Kristina.

This man had been defeated by the Wolf Clan's tactics twice now, and yet he still persisted in charging straight at them. That was, he supposed, quite fitting for the man said to have the heart of a tiger.

Skáviðr, on the other hand, would frankly have been quite satisfied with both sides staring each other down from opposite banks of the river all the way up until the day of the next full moon.

Even if that weren't plausible, he had hoped the enemy side would spend at least a few days in more careful observation of his actions. He hadn't anticipated that they would charge through the river as soon as the waters receded.

That was, in fact, the one course of action Skáviðr had most hoped they would not take.

Of course, what's done is done. Lamenting it now would do nothing to improve the situation.

Skáviðr unsheathed the blade at his waist and held it aloft. “We’re going to counterattack! Phalanx squads, advance!”

As he gave the order, the warhorns blared, and the Wolf Clan army roared to life.

“RROOAAAAAGHH!!”

Their war cries rose up in a burst of sound, and the ground rumbled as the heavily-armored longspear infantry unit, the phalanx, surged forward.

When Skáviðr had first heard about the “ox-yoke” formation Yuuto had utilized during the Battle of Gashina, he had been nothing but impressed with his liege lord. However, for this battle, he had been forced to discard it as an option.

At Gashina, the topography had been a large factor, with the Lightning Clan troops charging through a narrow mountain pass, making their movements predictable. Add to that that the Wolf Clan army at that time had been much larger than the Lightning Clan forces attacking them.

This time, the Wolf Clan had fewer troops on the field than their enemy. If they tried to use the same tactic, they would simply be crushed.

The phalanx tactic had also been defeated by Steinþórr once before, but at the very least, it boasted a high defensive capability second only to the wagon wall tactic.

“RAAAAAAGHHH!!”

The two advancing armies each threw out one more loud war cry as they collided.

The first few moments of the clash went in the Wolf Clan’s favor. It was a natural outcome. The Lightning Clan force was focused into a single point, Steinþórr, while the Wolf Clan was aiming a directed line of force against the

Lightning Clan ranks.

However...

“Haaah!” Steinþórr let loose a loud scream that reached even Skáviðr’s ears in the command formation at the rear of his army. With a mighty, whirling swing of his hammer, he launched a horizontal sweeping strike from the right.

The Wolf Clan longspears in the arc of the hammer’s swing were unceremoniously broken in half.

He followed with another attack from the left.

A hole opened up in the wall of spears, and the Lightning Clan soldiers quickly began flooding into that gap. The Lightning Clan’s point of force became a line.

Steinþórr’s rampage didn’t end there. With each swing of the warhammer, another hole opened up in the ranks of the phalanx.

That overwhelming display of power went on to ignite a fervor in the Lightning Clan fighters, and they lost all fear, transforming into bloodthirsty berserkers.

At this point, they were becoming too strong to handle.

The scales tipped in favor of the Lightning Clan, as if the Wolf Clan’s momentum at the start had never existed.

“A single man, turning the tide of battle... your strength is as ludicrous as ever,” Skáviðr smirked. “But the fact that you’re only one man is also the Lightning Clan’s weakness.”

That hearkened back to the advice Skáviðr had received from Yuuto before setting out for battle, and he reflected again on its great wisdom.

Steinþórr was a warrior of peerless strength, without any equal in the world. And that was the catch. There was only *one* of him.

In other words, no matter how inhumanly powerful of a monster he might be, he could not fight in two places at once.

“Send the smoke signals now!” Skáviðr ordered. “Tell the special forces to begin the attack!”

Sigrún's special forces unit was situated in the western flank of the Wolf Clan army, waiting on the signal to attack with bated breath.

It was comprised of mostly younger men, but over the two years after Yuuto had first become the patriarch, the special forces had become one of the Wolf Clan's trump cards. They'd seen action in a great many battles and racked up experience and accomplishments to match, growing into a force of elite fighters.

Though it was clear that the main body of the army had already entered combat, everyone here still maintained their calm, without getting nervous or worked up.

That composure alone marked them as seasoned veterans.

"There it is!" Sigrún confirmed the smoke signal, and immediately signaled to her men with a jerk of her chin. "All right! Múspell Special Forces, move out!" She sprang forward into motion.

The members of her unit switched from their relaxed state into fierce warriors in an instant, racing behind Sigrún in an orderly formation.

The special forces unit was comprised solely of cavalry, and its excellent mobility made it a superior fighting force in Yggdrasil, where chariots were still the most powerful battlefield unit for most armies.

The only force that could compare to them in terms of mobility was the nomadic Panther Clan, whose fighters were trained from childhood in horse-riding and horseback archery, and who now possessed stirrups, just as the Wolf Clan did.

In no time at all, the special forces rode out and around to the flank of the Lightning Clan, charging into them from the side.

This was the hammer and anvil tactic, a core Wolf Clan move that had brought them victory many times now.

The sturdy phalanx formation had already been defeated by the Lightning Clan once. However, that was only because the monster known as Steinþórr was strong enough to push them back with his brute strength.

Steinþórr was now leading the Lightning Clan troops from the front. And so, there was nobody here at their flank capable of repelling the Wolf Clan special forces when they attacked.

If Steinþórr had for some reason not been at the front, the phalanx troops could have then pushed forward and crushed the Lightning Clan front lines.

Steinþórr would likely have been unable to stand that, moving immediately to the front, at which point the special forces could have begun attacking the flank in that opening, timed to the moment he moved away from them.

And in this instance, where Steinþórr *was* at the front, then the defensive power of the phalanx meant that they could slow him down as he dealt with them, while the special forces pierced his army's flank.

After taking Yuuto's words of advice to heart, and consulting with Sigrún, this was the principal strategy Skáviðr had come up with for this battle.

"The enemy is confused! Press forward!" Sigrún shouted as she swiped her spear sideways, its blade taking a Lightning Clan soldier's head clean off. She immediately followed by charging forward and using her horse to knock two more soldiers off their feet.

The special forces fighters under her command were all fighting well, killing the enemy without any trouble.

The combat was progressing completely in their favor, hands-down.

They were like a pack of wolves descended upon a mass of confused and panicking herbivores.

They proceeded to tear through the ranks of the Lightning Clan.

"Huh, what?" Steinþórr sensed something was amiss behind him, and halted his horse, turning around to look.

Straining his ears, he could more clearly hear the blend of pained screams and angry cries. That had to mean combat had broken out somewhere in the back of his formation.

"Did they plant some kind of ambush...? No, it's probably that group of fighters on horseback." He clicked his tongue as he arrived at the answer. "Tch,

that's right, they used those guys on us before."

Steinþórr had repelled their cavalry unit easily the last time, so he hadn't anticipated his enemy would use them again.

On the battlefield, an army is oriented with its force directed forward to strike the enemy, leaving the sides and rear vulnerable to attack. There was no mistaking, then, that the back flank of his army must be having a terrible time of it right now.

"Should I leave the front to the others and head back there, then?" he wondered aloud.

But there was the problem with that idea: The only reason his men were doing so well against the enemy longspears was because Steinþórr was at the front.

If he were to leave the front line, the Wolf Clan would surely regain their footing and begin to push his army back.

But if he *didn't* head back, his army would be torn apart from the rear.

As the saying goes, "What aids one may harm the other; one cannot be in two places at once."

"Hmph, I guess I have to hand it to you guys," he muttered.

He really wished there were more than one of him now.

But naturally, reality did not oblige. There was only one Steinþórr. And there was no time for him to waver in his decision.

This was a moment of crisis, and yet Steinþórr's lips twisted into a savage, beastly grin.

"So I'm damned if I go back, and damned if I go forward, eh? Well then, there's only one choice for me to make!"

"He should already be well aware of the disaster occurring at his back, and still he refuses to move from the front line, then?" Skáviðr growled bitterly.

In the distance ahead, he caught sight of some of his own soldiers being flung bodily up into the air.

One could search all of Yggdrasil and likely only find one person capable of launching fully grown men that high into the air in combat: Steinþórr the Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of Vanaheimr.

In other words, it proved Steinþórr was still fighting there, at the head of his formation.

“That man never seems to want to move the way I want him to,” Skáviðr grumbled.

If the red-haired patriarch had rushed to the back flank to protect his forces there, Skáviðr would have immediately sent smoke signals to tell the special forces to pull back, while ordering his front lines to regroup and press forward.

Then, as the Wolf Clan gained the advantage and Steinþórr returned to the front line to reverse their momentum, Skáviðr could have quickly sent another order to have the special forces resume their attack.

Steinþórr would have been forced to travel back and forth, focused on protecting his men at his current location, while the Wolf Clan rallied the attack on the side he was absent from.

Skáviðr’s calculation was that this would push the battle into a more even contest.

That had been his intention, anyway, but his foe was proving to be a man who only charged ever forward.

“Ironical that normally, this would be the best opportunity one could ask for,” Skáviðr said with a sigh.

If Steinþórr was keeping himself on the front line, then naturally the special forces were wreaking havoc across his formation from the flank.

In a short while, they would succeed in splitting the Lightning Clan forces into two.

Once that was accomplished, the separated halves would each be only four thousand men strong, and that would result in the Wolf Clan force of six thousand being enough to defeat them, the balance of power of the armies being reversed.

Skáviðr had been instructed by Yuuto on a passage written by the man known as Sun Tzu:

“We gather as one while the enemy is fractured in ten, and so they must attack with ten fragments against the one. Hence, we shall be many to the enemy’s few.”

The passage was apparently written in an older style of Yuuto’s language, so Skáviðr had asked for an explanation.

Yuuto had explained that it summarized the strategy of keeping one’s own troops united as one body while finding ways to force the enemy to divide theirs. In the cited example, by fracturing the enemy into ten parts, one could use one’s whole troop strength to attack enemy forces that were now each only one tenth of their original strength. In this way, one sought to *create* a numbers advantage.

It was something completely obvious once pointed out in that way, but that was also what made it such a valuable truth.

And so, Skáviðr was following this principle of strategy and splitting the Lightning Clan forces. Once they were split, by all rights he should only need to have his troops attack a few specific areas, and that would lead his side to victory. However...

“Splitting them once wasn’t enough.” Skáviðr shook his head.

Steinþórr wasn’t going to be stopped by an enemy force merely one and a half times the size of his own. If Skáviðr was hoping to stop the man head-on, he would need to outnumber him five or ten to one.

Still, perhaps affected by the attacks happening at their rear, the Lightning Clan soldiers had come down from their berserker state of mind. The seemingly-overwhelming ferocity of their assault had abated.

Then again, after having had their forces split in this way, they were still refusing to succumb to fear and panic, and were maintaining their morale. That itself was a bit of a surprise.

“In that case, we need only split them yet again!” Skáviðr declared.

The special forces unit had plowed their way through the Lightning Clan ranks and out of the opposite side; they now turned around and began a second assault.

This would surely be enough. Even if it did nothing to stop Steinþórr himself, it would fully panic his men, and his army would lose its ability to function.

Skáviðr just needed his side to hold out long enough for that to happen, and so he desperately continued to give commands.

He shouted at his men and encouraged them; others he motivated with fear, threatening them with the punishment of strict Wolf Clan law; and others still he enticed with the temptation of great rewards.

He gathered the Wolf Clan troops in a tighter, more centralized formation and did his best to maintain it.

Every deft action was thanks to, and proof of, his great level of experience as a general.

But eventually, the defensive lines could no longer hold out, and they began to break apart.

“Still not yet?! Khh... at this rate we will be overrun!”

Once the lines broke for the first time, they were entirely too fragile.

“Please forgive me, Master.” Skáviðr briefly looked up toward the heavens and closed his eyes, his brow furrowed. Then he opened them and gave the order: “...Retreat!”

For a field commander, the ability to ascertain and read the tide of battle was vital.

If he were to indulge himself in thinking *just a little more, just a little longer*, hanging on to unrealistic hopes, then he would misjudge when it was the right time to withdraw. That would only bring much greater casualties upon his side.

Both victory and defeat were normal in war. Once it became clear that a loss was certain, the important thing was to throw away the remaining desire for victory and order a swift retreat.

In Japanese history, one can see this was demonstrated even by the infamous

warlord who named himself the “Demon King”: Oda Nobunaga.

At the Battle of Kanegasaki in 1570, from the very start of the battle, Nobunaga had fought with a clear advantage against his opponents, the Asakura Clan.

But as soon as he learned that his ally Azai Nagamasa had broken with him to side with the Asakura, Nobunaga quickly switched tack and ordered a retreat.

The swiftness of that decision left no good opening for the Asakura forces to attack, and kept Nobunaga’s losses to a minimum during the withdrawal. The great success of the “Retreat at Kanegasaki” was praised in the generations to come.

The course of this battle with the Lightning Clan had already been determined, and reversing that course was nigh impossible. Even if the special forces succeeded in splitting the enemy again now, the scattered Wolf Clan lines could no longer be restored.

It would require someone with god-like charisma taking command; someone like Yuuto, or Steinþórr.

Skáviðr was certainly worthy of being called a great commander, but he did not possess anything akin to that.

The Wolf Clan warhorns blared three notes in a row to signal the retreat. From throughout the ranks arose the voices of unit officers, barking orders at the rank and file.

“Withdraw! Withdraaaw!”

“We’re getting out of here, men!”

“Hurry, now!”

A shudder washed through the Wolf Clan army.

Any normal army at this point would completely lose its chain of command, with individual fighters putting their own lives first and making a run for it, cascading to the point where everyone fell into a state of confusion and fear.

But this was the army of the Wolf Clan, ruled by a strict and uncompromising law. And their supreme commander was a man who had fought and led the

rearguard many times in his career, earning a reputation as a master of fighting while retreating.

“Do not break ranks! Move quickly but with focus; do not rush and do not panic!” Skáviðr shouted harshly from his easily visible position on horseback, as he waved his arm to signal the direction of the retreat.

In a field battle, normally the commander was the first one to escape in the case of a withdrawal. And that was usually the correct choice.

However, if the leader remained visible on the front lines, it could grant the troops some sense of reassurance, some sense that things were still all right.

While it could not be said that this worked completely, it did seem to have an effect — the retreating soldiers maintained some level of order, and chaos was kept to a minimum.

“Take this, and this, and THIS!” With mighty swings, Steinþórr sent the fleeing Wolf Clan troops flying left and right, opening a path and plunging ever forward.

At last, the red-haired monster reached Skáviðr.

“Oh! I found you, you scraggly wolf!” Steinþórr grinned and ran his tongue across his lips as he caught sight of Skáviðr.

“So you’ve already made it this far, Dólgþrasir,” Skáviðr said coldly.

“Ha ha ha, hey, what’s the commander of the army doing hanging around here? I figured you’d be long gone by now. Wasn’t running away supposed to be your specialty?” Steinþórr casually tapped his iron hammer against his shoulder as he taunted Skáviðr.

Three times now, the two of them had met in combat, and all three times, Skáviðr had fled.

Steinþórr was trying to insult him for that, likely in the hopes of keeping him from escaping again.

“Heh, it just so happens I’m here protecting what I’ve been entrusted with,” Skáviðr replied, readying his spear.

From Skáviðr’s perspective, this army had been given into his care only temporarily by his patriarch, Yuuto.

Even if Yuuto was an incredible leader who had never been defeated while in command, that meant little if he had no soldiers remaining *to* command.

Skáviðr needed to preserve as many Wolf Clan soldiers as possible and give them back to Yuuto, and he was prepared to put his own life on the line to do that.

“I’ll give you some advice, as someone who has lived longer than you: You live your life in a reckless rush, Dólgprásir. This place is perfect for you to have a bit of a rest.”

“Ha! Then I’ll do just that,” Steinþórr shouted, “after I kill you!”

With a cry, he spurred his horse forward, and brought his warhammer to bear in a diagonal, downward swing.

Skáviðr reacted to the attack with perfect understanding; rather than trying to block directly, he swung a counter from the side, to knock the hammer off of its trajectory.

But, right before the two weapons met, the warhammer suddenly froze in its tracks.

Clang! Skáviðr’s spear blade slammed against the warhammer, but it did not budge an inch.

“Didn’t I already tell you before?” Steinþórr said casually. “I’ve figured out your moves.”

“Ngh...!” Skáviðr hurriedly made to pull his spear back into stance.

“Too slow!” Steinþórr swung his hammer in the same direction, as if he’d been aiming for that all along.

With the unexpected additional force added to Skáviðr’s spear, it was flung uncontrollably upward.

“Wha?!” Skáviðr was nearly always a picture of perfect calm, but now his face was awash with pure shock.

His reaction was understandable. Steinþórr had utilized Skáviðr’s own strength and force against him to knock him off balance. It was the “willow technique,” Skáviðr’s own personal technique.

After witnessing it only a few times, Steinþórr hadn't just learned to read it, he'd been able to *recreate* it.

Steinþórr was capable of far more than simply relying on the singular application of his incredible strength. He was also an expert talent when it came to technique in combat, which was what made him such a terrifying foe.

"Now, die!" With those short words, Steinþórr quickly swung his warhammer in a sweeping strike.

"...!" Skáviðr hurriedly lurched his upper body away, attempting to duck the blow.

A strand of his hair fluttered through the air. If his reaction had been even just an instant slower, his head would have been sent flying.

Steinþórr's attacks did not stop there. He quickly brought the hammer around to unleash a downward, vertical strike.

By this point, Skáviðr had already dropped his spear and had a hand on the sword at his belt. He fully understood now that he couldn't hope to match the speed of Steinþórr's attacks with his long, heavy spear.

He pulled his blade free of its scabbard and brought it up in time to receive Steinþórr's attack.

However, there was nothing he could do about the vast gulf in power between them. At this rate, he would be overwhelmed.

He managed to move his body to one side at the last second, but couldn't dodge the attack completely. The hammer strike grazed Skáviðr's head and shoulder.

It only clipped him slightly; there was no immediate threat to his life. However, the impact of the blow was still intense; his vision wavered and blurred, and he lost his sense of balance.

That one landed hit had likely given him a concussion.

"Ghh..." Skáviðr was a warrior, and his instincts held him up, his blade returning to a ready stance. But his eyes were still out of focus.

"This is it!" Steinþórr shouted. He saw an opening, and he wasn't about to let

it pass. He swung his hammer around once more.

“I won’t let you!” another voice shouted.

At the last moment, Steinþórr’s strike was interrupted as Sigrún lunged forward into the space between the two men, spearpoint first.

“Tch. Again,” Steinþórr clicked his tongue in irritation as he deftly dodged the spear thrust. “This always happens right when I almost have him.”

He had been certain that this time, he would at last take the head of his foe, the “scraggly wolf.” That failure only made him all the more agitated.

“I will take charge of the rearguard. Assistant Second, get out of here!” As she said this, Sigrún tossed aside her spear and drew her own *nihontou*.

“No, wait, you can’t fight alone against... ngh!” Skáviðr’s words cut off in a gasp of pain, and he grimaced and held a hand against his temple.

“And what can you hope to do in that state?” she shot back. “You’re in the way. Get out of here. Now.”

“But...!”

“The duty of the Mánagarmr is to protect the soldiers of the clan by always fighting at the fore. Isn’t that right? You were the previous Mánagarmr. And I... am the current one.”

Sigrún did not look behind her as she spoke. She kept her eyes steady on Steinþórr the whole time, showing only her back to Skáviðr.

To Skáviðr, she seemed to tower much larger than her own slender frame. He could see the warrior’s spirit filling her.

He found himself feeling moved in a way that was difficult to describe. *Just when did she come this far...?* he wondered.

With his current injury, Skáviðr wouldn’t be able to fight properly anymore. He had no choice but to place his bet on her.

“...All right. Then I leave the rest to you.” Skáviðr turned his horse around, and kicked it into a run.

“Don’t think I’ll let you get away!” Steinþórr shouted.

“That’s my line!” Sigrún yelled back.

Clang!

From behind him, Skáviðr heard the sound of Sigrún’s reply, punctuated by the high-pitched clash of metal against metal.

“Haaaah!”

“Tyaaah!”

Kshiing! Claaang!

The air around the two warriors echoed with beast-like shouts and the loud, percussive clashing of their weapons.

“Take that, and that, and that!” Steinþórr shouted excitedly as he pressed Sigrún back. To no one’s surprise, the Battle-Hungry Tiger had the advantage.

Sigrún’s weapon was a master work that even Steinþórr’s destructive rune Mjqlnir could not smash apart, but if anything, that was just what he wanted.

The fact that his enemies could never withstand any attack from him meant that he never felt any challenge or satisfaction from destroying them. At least this meant the two of them could have a real fight.

But after a moment, he began to doubt even that much.

“Come on, come on, what’s wrong?! You seriously stepped up to lead the rearguard when you’re *this weak*? You’re not gonna buy any time at all for your friends to escape!”

“Ngh...! Hah! Toh!” Sigrún managed to match Steinþórr’s strikes with her own, but with each attack, Steinþórr was slowly but surely cornering her.

It was only a matter of time now before his warhammer would strike true against this silver-haired girl — or so Steinþórr thought.

“In that case...!” Sigrún’s eyes narrowed, and then her attacks suddenly came at Steinþórr with much greater speed and power than before.

“Whoa!” Steinþórr couldn’t believe his eyes. He whistled, impressed. “Hey, looks like you’ve got it in you after all. Why didn’t you start off with— w-whoa?!”

Steinþórr's undaunted, casual taunt was cut short by an even stronger rush of attacks from Sigrún that came at him like a whirlwind.

"Toh! Hah! Haah!" Sigrún said nothing to Steinþórr; indeed, she didn't even seem to hear his words. She was utterly and completely focused only on striking with her blade.

Her face looked different, as if she'd been possessed by some warrior god, and her attacks felt that way too. With every attack, her strikes seemed to grow even *more* swift, more skillfully placed.

At last, the momentum of the fight shifted, and now it was Steinþórr forced onto the defensive.

"Whoa, whoa, seriously?" Steinþórr was taken aback.

It was true that he was tired, since he'd been fighting non-stop since morning, and it was also true that his combat senses weren't driven up to their maximum potential, like when he'd been surrounded by multiple enemy Einherjar at once.

But even so, Steinþórr had not been going easy on his opponent at all.

This was a first-time experience for him.

Even counting the scraggly wolf from earlier, no one he'd met in his life had ever managed to fight on an equal level with him before.

What's with this girl's ridiculous reaction speed?!

His enemy's physical abilities had suddenly increased dramatically, but even so, Steinþórr was still capable of swinging his weapon faster, and with much greater power behind each blow.

And yet, it was as if she had the ability to see into the future. She seemed to predict his every move, moving to shut down his attack motions before he could scarcely begin them.

It wasn't that she had discovered the patterns in his attacks and was acting based on that. Steinþórr was a peerless, natural talent at fighting. He didn't fight with any sort of fixed "form" to begin with.

She was simply and purely seeing his attack motions the instant they began, and reacting to that with absolutely abnormal speed.

Steinþórr had no way of knowing it, but this was the ability Sigrún had unlocked within herself at the climax of her battle to the death with the ferocious garmr, an ability she had come to call “the realm of godspeed.”

It is said that sometimes, when a person is pushed to their limits in a life-or-death moment, time and everything around them seems to slow down from their perspective. This was the essence behind Sigrún’s ability.

Ironically, Steinþórr himself had served as the catalyst on this occasion: He was unquestionably an enemy far beyond her power, and losing to him would mean certain death. He had forced her consciousness beyond its normal boundaries and into the realm of her ability.

At last, Sigrún’s blade managed to graze Steinþórr’s cheek, and he gasped. “Ah...!”

It was nothing more than a scratch, but this was yet another first. Never in Steinþórr’s life had an enemy managed to touch him with their weapon.

“Keh heh heh, ah hah hah hah! This is so much *fun!*” Steinþórr licked the blood dripping down from the cut on his cheek, and grinned with delight. He didn’t care at all that he was on the back foot.

To Steinþórr, life’s greatest joy was in finding and fighting strong opponents.

Sigrún’s furious assault continued for a few more moments. But after about ten more clashes, suddenly, the speed of her movements began to drop considerably.

Clang!

Their two weapons clashed, but Sigrún’s reaction was clearly the slowest it had been so far.

Steinþórr’s attack had more than enough strength behind it this time, and it repelled her sword blade upward.

He spun his wrist and made to strike with the butt of the hammer’s haft, and as he did, he saw that Sigrún’s face was ghastly pale, almost blue, and sweat was pouring down her face.

Though they had been fighting furiously, it had only really been a few short

moments in terms of elapsed time. Yet she looked like she had been running at full speed for a whole hour.

With only the support of her one rune, she had fought the twin rune Einherjar Steinþórr on equal footing, and for a brief moment, she had even surpassed him.

It seemed that such a feat had put a considerable amount of strain on her.

“Tch. I was happy to see it looked like you’d really improved, but this is still all you’re capable of, huh?” Steinþórr paused, staring at her with disappointment. Things had finally looked like they were about to get interesting for him, and once again, he had been let down.

He gave a long sigh and lowered his weapon, then jerked his chin to the side. “Go. I’ll let you leave, this time.”

“Haah... haah... Wha... what are you... trying to pull?” Sigrún was wheezing so hard she could barely speak, but she glared hard at him all the same, suspicion in her eyes.

Steinþórr shot her an amused smile, and tapped his warhammer casually against his shoulder.

“I remembered what that scraggly wolf said to me about you. Said that in two years’ time, you’d surpass him. It’s been less than a year since he said that. There’s another year left, then. I’ll give you one more chance to live and make it happen. It’s your reward for managing to cut me.”

With his true rival Suoh-Yuuto gone, Steinþórr had lost the best source of fun in his life.

In this whole world of Yggdrasil, there were only maybe a couple of people, if that, whom he could seriously fight against with his full strength.

This girl had real potential. It had only been for a moment, but she had fought on par with him.

It would be a fun bit of sport to let her go, and see just how much further she could grow.

“Haah... haah... you’ll... come to regret this choice,” Sigrún panted.

“Then make me regret it.”



Steinþórr made a gesture with his free hand as if shooing away a dog.

Sigrún glared hard at Steinþórr one last time, and then, saying nothing, turned her horse and galloped away from him.

And thus, the second Battle of Élivágar River came to an end, with the Lightning Clan victorious.

The Lightning Clan continued their advance, and began marching on Gimlé.

And the Wolf Clan army no longer had the power to stop them.

Meanwhile, at approximately the same time, the detached section of the Panther Clan army led by Hveðrungr, three thousand men strong, was surrounding the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr.

The area around the city had no forests or groves of trees, so there was nowhere suitable for assembling the Panther Clan's powerful siege weapon, the trebuchet.

Furthermore, Fólkvangr was one of the few very large cities in the Álfheimr region. It would probably take quite a considerable amount of time to take the city with a force of only three thousand.

As it happened, though, Hveðrungr's objective here wasn't to capture Fólkvangr.

This was simply one part in his strategy to overcome the Horn Clan army's "wagon wall" defense.

To the Panther Clan army, comprised entirely of fighters on horseback, the high wall of reinforced wagon carriages was like their natural enemy.

In fact, perhaps it was more appropriate to change perspective, and think of them as if they really were fortress walls.

Which is to say, despite Hveðrungr's enemies being out on the field, they were locking themselves into a type of fortress.

That wasn't something he could overcome with sheer force.

So in that case, how *could* he bring down their fortress?

The answer was simple. There were tried and tested methods of defeating

someone holed up in a castle or fortress. One key element was starving the enemy of supplies.

And that was where Hveðrungr had hit upon his strategy. He would surround Fólkvangr, the source of army resources in this region, and thus cut off supplies to the Horn Clan troops behind their wagon walls.

As for the Panther Clan's source of supplies, the main body of the army was getting plenty from their previous base at Fort Gashina. And the detached squadron was securing what they needed by attacking and pillaging the nearby villages.

Being so close to the clan capital, everywhere within sight was cultivated farmland, stretching out to the horizon in all directions. There wasn't going to be any difficulty getting food.

As for the soldiers protecting themselves within the wagon walls, they would likely move soon to either secure supplies for themselves, or to attack the Panther Clan in retribution for their actions.

And of course, that was exactly what the Hveðrungr wanted.

If that happened, it would give the seven thousand fighters in the Panther Clan army's main formation all the opening they needed to cross the river and reach the Horn Clan side unscathed.

The enemy had to move at the speed of those heavy wagons. There was nothing they could do to avoid how slow and sluggish it made them. In contrast, the Panther Clan was the fastest army in Yggdrasil, and had three times the troop strength.

The Panther Clan could freely move around and in front of their enemies, destroying the supply sources they were heading for. They would continue this process for as long as it took, and slowly strangle their enemy.

Because the army had been supplied by Fólkvangr, they likely didn't have much on hand.

"I'd give them about ten days or so, at best," Hveðrungr estimated aloud.

And as it turned out, his prediction was not far off.

ACT 8

“Uuugh...” A miserable groan escaped Yuuto’s lips.

Both Gimlé and Fólkvangr were now surrounded by the enemy.

Having received one horrible piece of news after another, Yuuto hunched over, and felt his body shuddering.

“But it does sound like Skáviðr and Sigrún managed to make it out in one piece...” Mitsuki said softly.

“That’s the one bit of good news,” Yuuto said grimly. “Even the two strongest warriors in the Wolf Clan still couldn’t stop that idiot.”

Yuuto bit his lip in frustration.

He had told himself that somehow, they could manage to hold out for just one month. But those fleeting hopes were being dashed by reality, which was far less merciful.

Yuuto had won every battle he’d fought as a commander and made a name for himself in Yggdrasil as a great leader, but he himself had never once thought of himself in that way.

To his view, all he’d ever done was copy and make use of knowledge, weapons, and techniques that came from far in the future compared to that world. That was what gave his clan the overwhelming military strength that allowed it to defeat its enemies.

He wasn’t like one of those genius war tacticians in manga, who could predict the thoughts and actions of the enemy in real time on the field, and thus always act one step ahead. That sort of thing was completely beyond someone like him.

He *had* managed to come up with two potential ways of stopping Steinþórr, but one of them absolutely required that it be Yuuto himself who carried it out, and the other required something that didn’t exist in Yggdrasil, which was in Yuuto’s possession.

The strategist Sun Tzu often talked in his works about the need to adapt on

the fly to the enemy's actions, and to the conditions of the moment. For Yuuto right now, getting information about his people out in the field and getting his orders sent back to them came with a time lag of several *days*.

That was why he was settling for giving general strategy advice, and then entrusting decisions on the field to the commanders there. But it seemed that hadn't been enough to work against Steinþórr, the man who defied all common sense.

"Ten days left until the full moon..." It felt like such a long time to wait. Yuuto wasn't sure how much longer they would be able to hold out.

Gimlé, in particular, was facing the menace of Steinþórr and his rune of Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer. Already, there wasn't any time to spare.

For Fólkvangr, the area around the city didn't have an easy lumber supply, so for the time being, they didn't have to worry about attacks from trebuchets, but it was still a highly unpredictable situation there.

"Urrgh, dammit! At this rate, even if the summoning works, it'll already be too late." Yuuto spat out the words in irritation, fed up with the unease that was welling up within him.

Gimlé would be the first to fall. Considering Steinþórr's strength, though, by the time he made it back, lárarviðr would likely have fallen as well.

If that happened, then the lives of his companions, his family, Mitsuki, they would all...

"Okay," Mitsuki said. "In that case, let's do it tonight. Let's try the summoning tonight."

"Excuse me? Tonight? What are you saying?" Yuuto instinctively looked out the window to check. The moon was still not even halfway full. "There's no chance that's going to..."

"Yeah, I know that there's not a good chance it'll work. Honestly, I don't even think I can pull off the incantation and the dance right, yet. But, even if it does fail, it's not like there's any penalty for that, right?"

"Ah...!" Yuuto gasped. In that instant, it was like his mind had been struck by a

bolt of lightning.

This feeling had to be what people meant when they referred to the “scales falling from one’s eyes.”

It was just as Mitsuki said.

Because he’d been so sure the ritual would fail, he’d dismissed the very idea of trying it early. But there weren’t any negative consequences for simply performing the ritual itself.

They would benefit if it succeeded, and there were no losses if it failed. All they would have to do is try again during the night of the full moon, like originally planned.

And if they thought of this as a rehearsal for the final attempt, then even a failed early attempt had its own benefits.

“Okay, let’s do it,” Yuuto said with a nod. He made the decision immediately, and gave Mitsuki the go-ahead.

However, Yuuto could not possibly know that this choice would also bring misfortune upon him.



Within the sanctuary at the top of the sacred ritual tower, the Hliðskjálf, Mitsuki stood facing the divine mirror on its altar.

She was dressed differently than usual, in a beautiful and elegant outfit of the purest white.

Originally, these robes had been secretly prepared by the people in lárarviðr when they learned that Yuuto would be marrying Mitsuki and bringing her with him to Yggdrasil. It was to be her bridal wear. But now it would be used for another purpose.

This was, after all, a sacred religious ceremony, so she couldn’t do it properly in her normal attire.

Being dressed so differently would serve to focus her mind on the task, and increase her concentration. At least, that was the aim.

“...So, that’s why I’d like to perform the summoning ritual starting right now!” Mitsuki seemed to be speaking to empty air.

Gathered behind her were the few members of the Wolf Clan’s high officers who still remained in lárnvíðr. They were watching her nervously.

Perhaps to them, it appeared as if she were just standing there talking to herself. But that wasn’t the case at all.

Standing directly in front of Mitsuki, Rífa sighed with exasperation and slumped her shoulders. “Ridiculous. You only just got a handle on casting the Mistilteinn spell the other day. In fact, ridiculous isn’t even the start of it.”

Rífa’s body appeared transparent, like a hologram.

Of course, she wasn’t physically there, and the other people in the room couldn’t see her.

“Mistilteinn”: Translated from the language of Yggdrasil into Japanese, it became the word for “mistletoe.”

It was a seiðr spell that was used to open a channel to spirits, or the souls of the dead, or other such otherworldly forces. One could then communicate with those forces, or borrow power from them.

Mitsuki was using the power of this seiðr to open a channel between herself and Rífa.

Right now, the real Rífa was far away in Gláðsheimr.

According to Rífa’s explanation, for two humans to use magic to communicate with each other, they normally needed a special set of magically paired mirrors. However, it seemed that Mitsuki and Rífa were different, somehow, and furthermore seemed to share some sort of peculiar connection. They could use this method to communicate, without needing the usual proper items.

“There is nothing more frightening than an amateur,” Rífa grumbled. “They tend to try things an expert would never dream of.”

“I know that this is reckless,” Mitsuki said. “But in ten days from now, it might already be too late.”

“Hm, are things already that serious over there?”

“...Yes.” There was no reason for Mitsuki to hide anything now.

She told Rífa about how the Wolf Clan had been defeated at Élivágar River, and about how Fólkvangr was surrounded.

“...Haah. What a mess,” Rífa sighed again, in a slightly affected manner. “And here I was just about to go to bed, too.”

She directed a pointed glare at Mitsuki.

It was a roundabout and difficult-to-understand way of putting it, but she was agreeing to Mitsuki’s request.

Mitsuki bowed deeply with enough force that it looked like her forehead might hit her knees. “Th-thank you so very much!”

“W-well, I can’t very well have you or those people who shared a hotpot with me go dying, after all. It would weigh on my conscience.”

With that tacked-on excuse, Rífa turned her head slightly and gave a small, *hmph!*

Mitsuki had only known her for two weeks now, but that was enough to easily tell that this was her way of hiding her embarrassment.

It was so sweet, she couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey, what are you grinning about?! Something about that irritates me!”

“S-sorry!” Mitsuki exclaimed.

“Ugh, honestly, two hundred years of this empire’s history, and you have got to be the first person to ever push around the þjóðann to do your bidding like this, I’m sure of it.”

“P-push around, I would never do something so...”

“Oh, but it’s the truth. Think about it. I’ve spent all of my free time helping you, haven’t I?”

“Ohh....”

“Ah, but, well... If I imagine that it will all end tonight, then I suppose that puts a spring in my step. Now then, I’m going to get changed. Wait a moment.”

With this, Rífa began walking forward, though the image Mitsuki was looking at didn't move toward her. Then she suddenly started removing her clothes.

"Wh-wh-whoa! Wh-what are you doing?!" Mitsuki shrieked.

"What am I doing? I told you, I'm getting changed. This is a proper ritual, so I'll need to wear the appropriate attire."

"Uh, y-yes, that's true, but..." With a troubled expression, Mitsuki glanced at the people gathered behind her.

She knew that they couldn't see the image of Rífa, but she still felt them looking in her direction, and it made her uncomfortable all the same.

After all, this girl had the same face as her.

It was like watching herself undress and get naked in front of a crowd of people, and even though that wasn't strictly true, it *felt* like it. She felt her face slowly turning red from the neck up.

"Now then, Mitsuki, are you ready?" Rífa looked straight at Mitsuki with hard, serious eyes.

Rífa was now also clad in formal religious attire, with colors based in white and purple.

There was a slight glossiness to the light, fluttering material of her outfit. It was probably made mostly from silk.

The glittering, golden crown atop her head was adorned with feathers of the falcon, the "lord of the skies," and at its center was a large ruby.

It was a gorgeous combination, quite befitting of the Divine Empress said to rule all the realm of Yggdrasil.

"Ready!" Mitsuki replied. "Yuu-kun says his preparations are done, too."

Just a few moments ago, Felicia had finished confirming things with Yuuto over the phone. Right now he should be at the Tsukinomiya Shrine, standing in front of the divine mirror altar and using his smartphone camera to gaze into the mirror.

"Ssss... Haaah..." Mitsuki closed her eyes and took in a several slow, deep

breaths.

She could hear her own heart pounding. It was much faster than normal.

A failure here meant that much more Wolf Clan blood would be spilled. She had explained the idea to Yuuto with the explanation that they should try it because they had nothing left to lose, but of course she was still nervous.

She needed to change that nervous tension into strength, into power.

She sharpened her focus, bringing her mind's concentration and inner awareness up to its limit.

"I will now begin the ritual." Mitsuki spoke that solemn declaration, and opened her eyes.

Within those two eyes floated a pair of golden, runic symbols shaped like birds.

"Mm. Be sure and give me a proper signal," Rífa replied. "Your voice is the only thing I can hear."

"Right." Mitsuki nodded, and got down on one knee, placing the fingertips of both hands against the floor.

In the image in front of her, Rífa assumed the same pose.

Silence reigned over the sanctuary hall, and the air was incredibly tense.

Eventually, the sound of drums and pipes began to play behind her.

"Begin!" With that, Mitsuki stood up, and spread both of her arms wide.

In front of her, Rífa was mirroring those same motions, her arms out sideways.

"𐌿𐌸𐌹 𐌸𐌹𐌹 𐌹𐌸𐌹𐌹𐌺." In rhythm with the music, Mitsuki and Rífa chanted the words of the sacred vow in perfect unison, and slowly spun around in place once.

Performing these precise actions with precisely the same timing increased their synchronization with each other, and made the magical channel connecting Mitsuki to Rífa much wider and stronger.

"𐌿𐌸𐌹𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌹 𐌸𐌹𐌹𐌹."

They folded their arms and leaned slightly forward.

“<P|◊◊f 4<fXX.”

With a light, kicking step to one side, they thrust out their left arms.

The belled tassels wrapped around their arms and waist jingled with a soft, dignified sound as they moved.

“R&PpMY◊f. fP 4pM◊X.”

Bringing their left arms back, this time they stepped lightly in the other direction, and thrust out their right arms.

The tempo of the music suddenly increased.

Mitsuki and Rífa increased the speed of their flowing movements alongside it.

They performed the dance with single-minded devotion, dedicating their whole heart into each movement and verse.

And, at last... the music which had been so fast and aggressive suddenly stopped completely.

This was it.

Mitsuki used every ounce of air in her lungs as she shouted the final words of power.

“Gleipnir!”

As Mitsuki and Rífa called the final word in unison, a flow of bright light began to emanate from the palms of their outstretched right hands.

The two streams of light found each other and entwined with each other to create a single stream, which was flowed into the glass of the divine mirror.

This was the secret key to the plan Rífa had outlined to Mitsuki about how they could work together to summon Yuuto.

Regardless of Rífa’s magical prowess, without access to the special paired mirror, she could not perform the spell through it to call upon someone from the other world.

On the other hand, Mitsuki was a twin rune Einherjar with great potential, but

of course she wasn't going to be able to gain enough experience in one month to be able to overcome the magic of the great Witch of Miðgarðr, Sigyn.

In fact, at this point in time, Mitsuki's total power and ability with seiðr magic was still lower than Felicia's.

But, in a sense, Mitsuki was a "paired person" with Rífa, similar to the magical mirrors. And Rífa had come up with the idea of using the spell Mistilteinn, to let her use Mitsuki as a spiritual conduit for her own power. And through Mitsuki, she could also send her own Gleipnir spell into the divine mirror enshrined in lárnviðr.

"Ah?!" Mitsuki exclaimed.

It happened about ten seconds after the spell had activated. A sharp, snapping sensation passed through her right hand, as if something had been pulled taut. This was it: Gleipnir had caught hold of Yuuto.

However, the sensation of holding her target in her grasp quickly disappeared.

Next there was another quick, strong *snap!* and once again it felt as if something had been caught, but once again it vanished.

The closest analogy Mitsuki could think of was the sensation of holding a fishing line. It was as if the fish took the bait and pulled hard enough to bend the fishing pole, but then quickly let go and swam away.

"The magic is being deflected. It must be Fimbulvetr." Rífa spoke the name of the spell with frustration.

"Fimbulvetr": A seiðr spell which undid all bindings and released all restraints. It was Fimbulvetr which had undone Felicia's original casting of Gleipnir, and sent Yuuto back to the modern world.

The effects of that spell were still lingering in Yuuto's body, and it was rejecting the power of Rífa and Mitsuki's Gleipnir now.

"It looks like it's no good with the moon only being half full," Rífa said. "Our power put together is still losing out. Well, I knew that you didn't have much power to contribute in the first place, so that's hardly surprising."

“I-I’m sorry,” Mitsuki said tearfully. “B-but please try harder! We can’t just give up right away!”

“Do not panic,” Rífa scolded. “Our opponent is Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr, remember? From the beginning I knew this might happen. If one casting doesn’t suffice, we need only attack a second time!”

Her voice rising to a powerful shout, Rífa began chanting the sacred words of Gleipnir from the beginning once again.

Mitsuki hurriedly followed, matching her.

As they were already in the midst of firing the magical energy of Gleipnir from their right hands, they did not need to perform the dance again, and simply repeated the spell incantation.

“Gleipnir!”

As they finished the second incantation, they shouted the word of power.

This time, beams of light extended from the palms of their left hands.

“Ngh...!” Mitsuki simultaneously felt like all of the strength was leaving her body, all at once.

She was performing the spell this time without the full ritual, and while *already in the middle of activating* a fully-powered casting of Gleipnir. The strain on her body now was incomparably greater than it had been with just the one casting.

“Gghhhh!”

Even so, Mitsuki gritted her teeth and focused on supplying the power flowing out of her left hand.

At last, she felt a sudden and powerful pulling sensation in both arms, vastly stronger than anything thus far.

“All right, we have him!” Rífa shouted, satisfied with this result.

Even a casting of Fimbulvetr by the Witch of Miðgarðr herself should not be able to hold off the power of two twin rune Einherjar casting a doubled version of the same spell together.

“Mitsuki, we’re going to pull him to us!” Rífa called.

“Right!” Mitsuki nodded, and tried to pull back the cord of light...

“It — it won’t move?!” Mitsuki exclaimed.

“Ghh! What’s happening?!” Rífa shouted.

It was as if they were trying to pull up something with roots reaching deep into the earth. It wouldn’t budge.

It had nothing to do with the physical strength of the girls’ slender arms.

The seiðr spell wound its magic into a cord, but it wasn’t something one pulled with the arms. It was something one pulled with the heart, with a will that grasped and commanded the magic.

They were two twin rune Einherjar working in tandem. It was hard to imagine that the two of them didn’t have enough power. And yet...

“It’s the moon,” Rífa said. “If the moon isn’t full, then the wall between worlds will not open fully for us.”

“No, that can’t be...! We were able to break through Fimbulvetr just now!”

“Don’t think I am going to come this far and give up, either. We’ll wrench the damned thing open! Nghhaaa...!” Rífa cried out, and her spirit flared! The cords of light flowing out from her arms grew thicker.

However, even that wasn’t enough to pull Yuuto over to their side.

“Aaargh, then I’ll just cast a third... Urk, cough, cough!” As Rífa started to recite a third casting of Gleipnir, she suddenly began to cough terribly.

They weren’t the dry coughs of a sore throat. They were wet, violent, and *unsettling*.

Mitsuki saw that the pure white sleeves of Rífa’s robes were now covered with flecks of crimson red.

“L-Lady Rífa?! Y-you’re bleeding!” she screamed.

“Be quiet, and don’t panic! We’re going to pull Lord Yuuto to us! Focus only on that!” Rífa yelled, but she was wheezing and out of breath, and looked to be in a good deal of pain.

Mitsuki had heard before that Rífa bore some sort of hereditary syndrome.

It was likely that the intense stress from casting Gleipnir multiple times was becoming too much for her body to withstand.

“Uuuuughhh! Work, dammit!” Mitsuki screamed.

Rífa’s body wouldn’t be able to take this any longer. Mitsuki had to finish this as quickly as possible. She forced the magic out from within herself with all of her willpower.

She forced the magic out.

She forced herself harder.

She poured every last drop of energy in her body and soul into the magic flowing out of her hands.

But it still wasn’t enough to breach the wall.

It still wouldn’t budge.

“Ngh...!” Rífa made a pained sound, and Mitsuki saw that her right arm was fading from view.

The incorporeal image of Rífa had been semi-transparent to begin with, but now it looked like her right arm was vanishing completely.

“Krh... my power won’t last... any...”

“Gleipnir!” The voice, clear as a golden bell, echoed through the sanctuary.

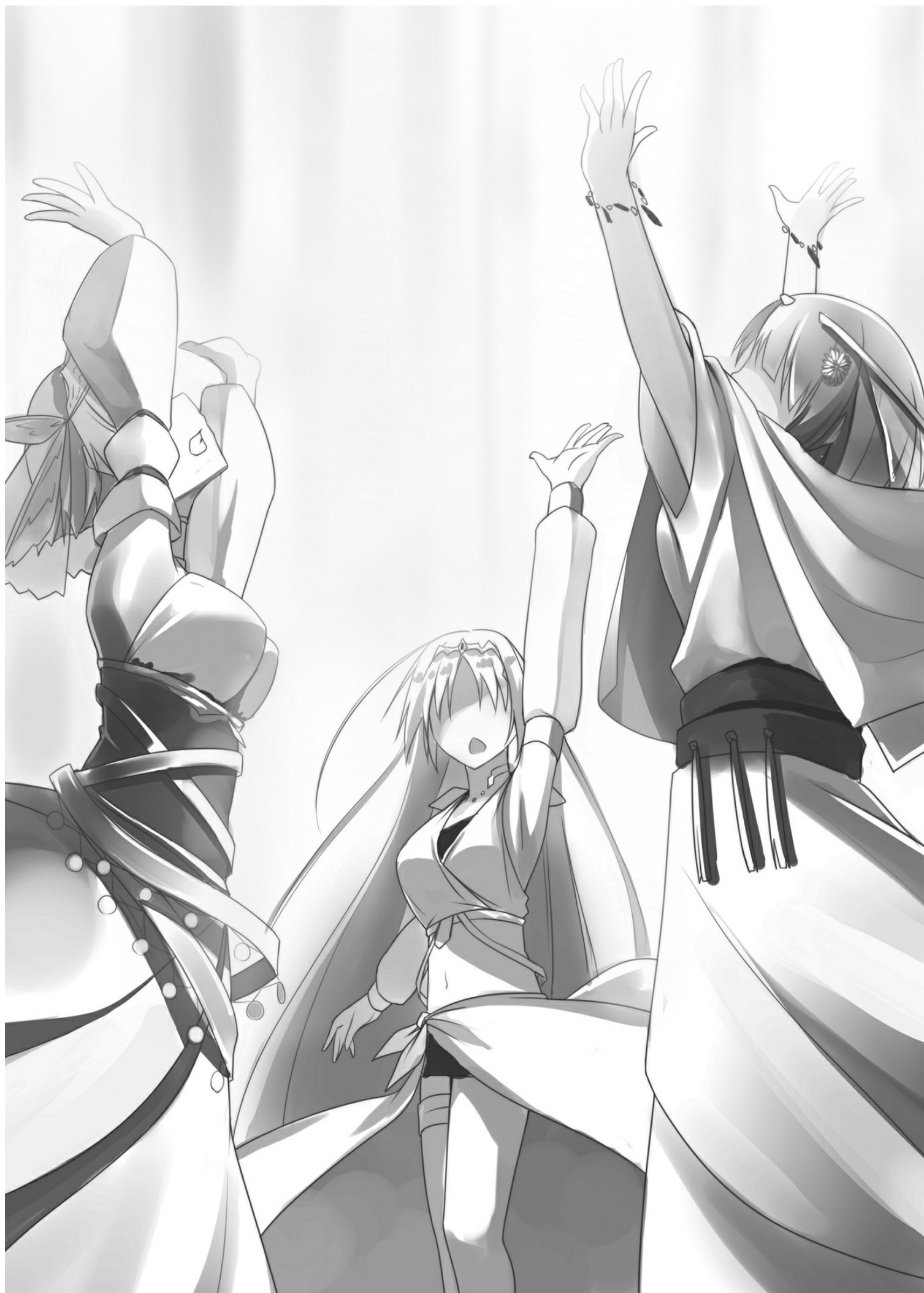
It wasn’t Mitsuki’s voice, nor was it Rífa’s.

“Felicia!” Mitsuki turned in the direction of Felicia’s voice and shouted her name with joy.

One more seiðr wielder had entered the sacred hall.

And what’s more, she was the one who had already succeeded at summoning two people to Yggdrasil from another world!

Suddenly, the cords of light that had not budged began to move...



Cock-a-doodle-doo!

The piercing cry of a rooster woke Sigrún, and her eyes snapped open.

She could remember having somehow made it as far as the city gates of Gimlé, but nothing after that.

She must have passed out at that point, as the tension left her body out of a sense of relief.

She recognized the ceiling above her. This was the room she'd been assigned when she'd first arrived in Gimlé. Perhaps someone else from her special forces unit had brought her here, then.

"Well, I'd better get... Ugh?!" As Sigrún tried to lift her body from the bed, an intense pain flowed through her arm, and she grunted in pain.

Her head was also throbbing. It felt like it was going to split open. Perhaps the sudden movement had been too much for her.

"...Ngh! Looks like I pushed myself a little too hard."

In the fight with the garmr, she had attained the ability she called the "realm of godspeed."

Every time she used it, afterward she would get bad headaches and joint pain, but this time, it was especially terrible.

Both during the battle with the garmr, and when she'd fought Váli of the Panther Clan, she'd only accessed that ability for no more than a brief moment. But this time, she'd fully exploited it to its limits, perhaps even overused it. This had to be the blowback from that.

"But I can't just lie around." Sigrún clenched her teeth and forced herself to stand, enduring the intense pain.

Was their commander Skáviðr alive and well?

How many soldiers, how many officers had made it back to Gimlé?

Where was the Lightning Clan army right now?

These questions all plagued her, and she had many more.

If there was anywhere the information she needed would be gathered, it would be with Skáviðr, the current governor of the Gimlé region and commander of the garrison and fortress stronghold here.

Her body ached with every step, but she dragged herself forward, supporting herself against one wall, and headed for the audience chamber.

At the back of that room was a smaller personal quarters for the commander, with an office and bedroom. If Skáviðr was here, that was where he would likely be.

But as it turned out, someone else was in the audience chamber already.

The roosters had just crowed with the dawn, and outside the sun still hadn't risen into the sky. The room was shrouded in darkness. The back half of the room was completely dark, so that even Sigrún's eyes couldn't make anything out from where she was.

However, her warrior's sense of smell was keen, and she could smell the presence of someone ahead.

It was two people, in fact.

Was it Skáviðr having a conversation with someone else? But no, Sigrún didn't hear any voices.

Both of the other people were keeping silent. Were they thieves, then? But no, she could not sense any trace of murderous intent.

Sigrún still placed a hand on the hilt of the sword at her waist, just in case, and slowly made her way toward the far end of the room.

The darkness became slightly clearer, and she could vaguely start to make out the outlines of the people there.

One of them was sitting on the slightly raised throne at the back of the room, leaning back with legs crossed. The second person was standing just to the side of the first.

Neither of them was Skáviðr. Those silhouettes didn't match.

However, they were both figures that she knew very, very well.

“How... this can’t be... am I still asleep, dreaming?”

Sigrún was trembling. Her head was still pounding, and the muscles in her arms, shoulders, and back still ached terribly.

“I’d heard one can’t feel pain in a dream, but perhaps that was a lie.”

“No, it just means you’re not dreaming,” replied the person on the chair. It was such a nostalgic, familiar voice to her.

She’d last heard his voice about ten days ago thanks to that strange device of his, but it had been muffled, and somehow distant. It was nothing compared to the real thing she was hearing now.

“But... that cannot be true,” Sigrún protested, even as her speech became more polite. “There should still be many days left until the next full moon.”

“For that, you’ll have to thank Mitsuki and Rífa... and Felicia here, too.” The young man on the throne cast a glance at the golden-haired woman at his side. “The three of them combined their power and basically forced a miracle to happen.”

It sounded plausible enough, but Sigrún still had difficulty believing it.

“Then how were you able to come all the way here, even to this room, without a single person realizing it?” she asked.

This was the command center of the fortress at the very heart of Gimlé. Sigrún had passed by a number of patrolling guards on her way here. If anyone had seen this young man by now, there would surely have been a great commotion.

But despite the heavy security within the fortress walls, it was still quiet.

And that wasn’t all. There was the Lightning Clan army, which should be advancing toward the city. No, perhaps they might already be in formation in front of the city by now.

How could he have slipped past *them* as well, before even having to pass the tightly locked city gates?

In the end, Sigrún just couldn’t trust that the young man in front of her was the real thing.

“You see, the thing about rulers is... it turns out that most of 'em think only about saving themselves.” The young man stood up and got off of the throne.

Felicia seemed to understand what he was getting at. She moved the chair to one side, removed the sheet covering the floor below it, and pulled at one of the flooring stones.

The stone pulled away to reveal a hole just the right size for a single person to climb down into, complete with a built-in rope ladder.

“Linnea told me about this secret passage, since her clan used to rule this area,” the young man explained. “If you go through here, it takes you all the way to a spot outside the city.”

True, if one were to use this passage, it wouldn't be strange if they could make it to this room without any of the guards noticing.

But still, Sigrún couldn't let herself believe.

It was too convenient, too good to be true.

She couldn't think of this as anything other than an illusion, a product of her deepest wishes.

“You... you did well in holding on until I could come back.” The young man placed a hand gently on top of Sigrún's head, and proceeded to pat her head gently.

That sensation, the feeling of kindness behind it, was something Sigrún's body remembered perfectly.

There was no way she could ever forget it.

After all, to her it was the greatest reward she could ever request.

She felt hot tears seeping into her eyes.

She didn't care if this was a dream or an illusion anymore.

“F-Father...!” Unable to stand it anymore, Sigrún leapt into Yuuto's arms, clinging to him.

She hit him with enough momentum to send them tumbling to the ground, but she didn't care anymore. She buried her face in his chest, concerned only

with using her senses to confirm that it really was him.

“Father! Father! Father! I... I’ve wanted to see you so, so muuuuch... waaahhhhh!” Sigrún could say no more, bursting into uncontrollable sobs.

“W-whoa, what?! Rún, what’s with you?! F-Felicia, do something!”

“I am not sure what exactly I should do,” Felicia said. “After all, this is also the first time I’ve seen Rún like this...”

Yuuto and Felicia exchanged worried remarks while Sigrún let her tears fall.

“What’s happened?! Wha... M-M-Master Yuuto?!” The door in the back of the room flew open with a *bang!* and Skáviðr’s shocked voice echoed in the dim room. He must have heard the commotion from his quarters and run in to investigate.



More voices and approaching footsteps could be heard from the entrance to the chamber.

“What’s going on?!”

“What’s all this?!”

It wasn’t one or two people, but at least five or ten.

Sigrún couldn’t allow herself to be seen crying like a common civilian girl in front of such a crowd. It would be a stain upon her honor as a warrior.

She tried willing herself to stop crying, but the feelings she’d held back continued welling up from deep within her heart, and so too did the tears.

However, as it happened, not one of the people who arrived on the scene paid any attention to her appearance.

“Pa... Pa-Pa-Patriarch Yuuto?!”

“I-is this a dream?! Am I dreaming right now?!”

They all stared intently at the face of the young man holding Sigrún, and then every one of them did exactly the same thing.

They each put a hand to their cheek and pinched, hard.

Doing so was the only way they could know for sure that this was reality.

“Welcome back!” one of them shouted at last.

“W-we are so glad that you have returned!”

“We can win! We can win this now!”

The others surrounded Yuuto, each of them shouting with joy, or crying, or cheering.

Eventually one of them shouted at the top of his lungs, “Sieg Patriarch!”

There was a brief moment of silence.

But then everyone realized that those words were what best captured the feeling that was in the hearts of everyone present.

Everyone exchanged glances, and then they all cheered as one:

“Sieg Patriarch! Sieg Patriarch!!” they shouted at the top of their lungs.

Their joyous cries spread to the people who heard them outside the audience chamber, and from person to person, until not just everyone in the stronghold, but everyone in the whole city was cheering together in a great, spontaneous chorus.

It was the Wolf Clan’s triumphant howl of exultation, announcing to the world that, after two long months, their master had finally returned home.

The massive sound from their cries did not merely shake the air; it seemed to shake the very buildings of the city itself.

“Hm? What’s going on?!” Steinþórr had been eating his breakfast of dried meat when he suddenly heard a commotion, cheering voices echoing out from the direction of the city. Still chewing on some meat, he left his tent to investigate.

As he opened the tent flap, the first thing that entered his vision was the tall, imposing city wall, solidly constructed from layer upon layer of baked bricks.

This was Gimlé, one of the most important Wolf Clan cities aside from their capital, lárnvíðr.

After they had beaten the Wolf Clan at Élivágar River, the Lightning Clan army had continued pursuing their defeated foe, and their advance had taken them all the way to this city.

When they’d arrived outside the city walls, the sun had already nearly set. They set up a perimeter around the city to prevent the enemy from escaping, and then began resting the troops. Today was the day they were to begin their attack on the city in earnest.

“SIEG PATRIARCH! SIEG PATRIARCH!!”

The cheers coming out of the city were so voluminous and loud that the vibrations rattled Steinþórr’s chest.

He’d set his camp some distance away from the walls in order to avoid attacks by archers, but even at this distance, the shouts felt as loud as if he were in the very midst of a fierce battle.

And what was most surprising of all was that they kept getting even louder.

“‘Sieg Patriarch’?” Steinþórr frowned and tilted his head, puzzled.

If they were talking about the Wolf Clan patriarch, then of course it had to be Suoh-Yuuto. But he was supposed to have been killed back at the Battle of Gashina.

“Surely it is a bluff,” said Þjálfi, walking up from behind to stand beside Steinþórr. “They mean to make their own soldiers think Suoh-Yuuto is still alive to boost their morale, and make us think the same to frighten us.”

Þjálfi must have heard the commotion from inside his own tent and been just as curious.

“Yeah, at first that’s what I thought it was too, but, don’t you think this is a bit too much for just a bluff?” Steinþórr asked.

“Mm, you have a point, now that you mention it...” Þjálfi trailed off in thought.

The cheers still hadn’t stopped, and they seemed to rumble through the atmosphere around them like thunder.

They puzzled over the problem. How many shouting people would it take to create this much noise? That was the question.

It was safe to say that a mere ten or twenty thousand wouldn’t be nearly enough.

The possibility that *every single citizen* of the city had begun cheering spontaneously was too absurd to consider. Even Steinþórr, the man whose strength defied common sense, and Þjálfi, the man who was used to his patriarch’s sense-defying ways, would never have considered it.

So they instead wondered where the Wolf Clan could have gathered enough soldiers from to make this noise. But the Wolf Clan hadn’t had that many soldiers before, so then, how could they have produced such a huge amount of new soldiers in the city without any prior warning or evidence?

Gathering up a large army and moving the troops meant being seen and heard. It should have been impossible to move a large number of troops here

without the Lightning Clan noticing anything at all.

The only person who could pull off that sort of magic trick was—

“Hm?! Hey, Þjálfí! Look, look there!” Steinþórr shouted.

“What?! B-black hair?! Could that be...?”

“Hahahaaaa! HAHAHAHAHA!!” Steinþórr burst out into joyous laughter. “So you’re alive after all, Suoh-Yuuto!!”

Just to the right of the main city gates was one of the wall’s lookout towers, and standing on the edge of that tower was a human figure. From this distance, a normal person wouldn’t be able to tell who it was, but Steinþórr had the eyes of a hawk, and he could make out the face of the black-haired young man standing there.

Even from this far away, Steinþórr would never mistake the face of the enemy he acknowledged as his true enemy and rival.

No matter how you looked at him, that was the Wolf Clan patriarch, Suoh-Yuuto.

Yuuto held up his right hand.

As he did so, there was a loud, heavy rumbling noise, as the tightly locked gates of Gimlé were *pulled open*.

Steinþórr tensed up. *Is that massive number of soldiers that was cheering gonna pour out of the gates to attack us?!* he thought, and readied himself. But no, that didn’t seem to be happening.

After a moment of wondering what was going on, he looked back up at Yuuto. Yuuto was looking right back down in Steinþórr’s direction, and with a hand, he made a haughty, beckoning gesture.

“He’s taunting me to come in!” Steinþórr felt a strange shiver run down his back.

If this were the Steinþórr from before the Battle of Gashina, he would have accepted the challenge and charged forward without any hesitation.

But now, he was different: Before every charge forward, he stopped once to

think.

During the first Battle of Élivágar River, he had been drunk on his victory in the first stages of the battle, and launched pursuit attacks against the retreating enemy that led him into a trap. The raging flood waters had swallowed him up, and he'd lost several thousand of his men.

Next, at the Battle of Gashina, he had imagined he was carving his enemy's formation in two, only to find that they had moved to surround him on all sides. In addition, he'd left Fort Gashina itself undefended and it was recaptured from behind him.

Every time he'd gotten too caught up in early victory and charged forward without paying attention, he had stepped into his enemy's trap and suffered for it.

That was what fighting Suoh-Yuuto had taught him.

This situation felt like it was following that very same pattern.

He'd just defeated the Wolf Clan at the second Battle of Élivágar River, erasing his shame for the loss during the previous battle there. And now he had come marching on Gimlé in high spirits, drunk on his recent victory. And here was Yuuto, opening the gates and happily inviting him in.

The raucous cheers from earlier also unsettled him.

What is this if not a trap?! the voice in his mind shouted. It's as plain as day! He's counting on using my nature against me, taunting me and counting on me being the man who used to charge in without thinking every time, no matter what!

Of course, Steinpórr also felt the desire to accept the challenge *anyway*, to charge in and use pure strength to tear apart whatever trap awaited him in there. And if he were alone, that would be one thing, but he had eight thousand of his children here with him.

His men had suffered at the hands of those traps several times now, so Steinpórr couldn't just tell them with confidence that they would absolutely be able to break through the next one.

Steinþórr gave a long, deep sigh, and he turned his back on Gimlé.

“We’re withdrawing.”

“Withdrawing?!” Þjálfi cried, astonished. He turned and shouted after Steinþórr, “After we’ve come this far?!”



Steinþórr didn't turn back around. He slumped his shoulders and said, "It's *because* we've come this far. We've reclaimed our honor at Élivágar River, and we recaptured the territory they took from us in the last war. If we stop now, this is still absolutely our win. Whenever we get too greedy with Suoh-Yuuto, it never turns out well. I'm not gonna walk into such an obvious trap and throw away our victory. That'd just be stupid. This is the right time to pull back."

"Th-the Lightning Clan army is withdrawing!" a Wolf Clan lookout pointed downward and shouted in a shrill, excited voice. He couldn't seem to believe his own eyes.

Even the governor of Gimlé, Skáviðr, was stunned as he looked upon this scene, and he wondered if it might be some trick.

"Haaugh, urgh, I really am sleepy. But riding a horse straight through the night will do that to you." Yuuto let out a huge yawn. He was perhaps the only person here able to casually yawn like this.

"So this is the thirty-second of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, the 'Empty Fortress'...." Skáviðr whispered.

He had already heard the details of the strategy from Yuuto once before.

The trick was to deliberately open the gates to one's stronghold and invite the enemy in, causing them to become incredibly wary of a trap, and to pull back instead.

When he'd heard it, he'd been stunned speechless by how utterly preposterous it sounded. But here he was seeing it in action, working exactly as intended. He still couldn't quite believe it.

Too many unrealistic things were happening today, and nothing felt real.

"Back in Japan, this trick is super famous, so nobody would be fooled by it, but over here, it's a strategy that's still from fifteen hundred years in the future," Yuuto said. "Of course you might think this was a trap, as long as you didn't know it was a trick."

"You are quite right..." Skáviðr murmured. "If I were in the shoes of the Lightning Clan commander, I too would find it so suspicious that it would make

me wary of moving forward.”

“Well, I guess that just means that idiot (Steinþórr) isn’t really a complete idiot, after all. I guess that makes sense; it’s only human to start to be wary of someone after they’ve worked you over twice.” Yuuto chuckled to himself mischievously.

You make it sound so simple, Skáviðr thought, and chuckled wryly.

If it had been someone like himself or Sigrún, then when they opened the gates, even knowing it was a trap, the Lightning Clan army would surely have come rushing in like a starving tiger, and torn the city apart.

That was because it wasn’t the Wolf Clan Steinþórr was wary of; it was Yuuto.

“There is no mistaking it... you truly are the incarnation of a god of war!” Skáviðr felt a shiver run through him as he said this.

Both the previous and current Mánagarmr, the strongest warriors of the Wolf Clan, had worked together to fight Steinþórr, risking their lives and using every ounce of their strength and intellect in the attempt, and they still could not stop him. And yet this young man had simply shown himself and made one gesture, and that had been enough to not only halt the advance of the Battle-Hungry Tiger, but make him retreat.

Yuuto was on a completely different level.

“Hey, this was nothing more than a simple lie,” Yuuto said. “It doesn’t even qualify as cheating.”

“Calling it ‘simple’ is being entirely too humble. At the very least, I would be too afraid to put that plan into action. After all, if they had chosen to attack, wouldn’t that have been the end of everything?”

The strategy had been so brilliant and satisfying only because it had worked. If it had gone wrong, they would have brought their enemy right into their city. It had been an incredibly dangerous bluff.

After all, their enemy was the Dólgprásir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger. If Steinþórr hadn’t taken any lessons from his two defeats, and had charged mindlessly forward again, the Wolf Clan forces may have been wiped out.

“If things came to that, I would’ve just used *this*.” Yuuto reached into the leather bag hanging from his right hip, and produced a certain item.

“What is that, exactly?”

“Oh, this? Well...” Yuuto proceeded to tell Skáviðr about the usage and effects of this particular item.

It was so small, light, and seemingly unreliable as a tool.

It certainly didn’t look nearly as frightening as Yuuto described it to be, but Skáviðr had no choice but to believe him. Yuuto wasn’t the type to lie about these things, and he had created so many miracles thus far.

He had just finished creating one a moment ago, in fact. Skáviðr had to trust him.

“...I see,” said Skáviðr. “So then, it seems that the tiger was actually the one whose life was saved when he chose not to attack.”

“That’s right. But he is a bit of a problem for us, so I guess it wouldn’t have been so bad to kill him here and put him out of our misery. If it weren’t for what’s happening at Fólkvangr, that’s what I would have done.” Yuuto said this matter-of-factly, and there was a chilly edge to his tone.

“...?!” When Skáviðr heard those words, he felt sudden a sense of tension, a sensation like a blade was being held to his throat. It triggered an instinctive fear that made his blood run cold.

Skáviðr was a famous veteran of fighting battles while retreating, and so he had survived through some truly hellish situations. And right now, this young man half his age *terrified* him.

There was the fact that he’d dismissed that inhumanly strong monster as merely “a bit” of a problem, but more than that, it was the fact that he’d spoken of killing Steinþórr with no unnecessary emotion, or hesitation. That level of cold dispassion was something the old Yuuto had not possessed.

Skáviðr hadn’t seen Yuuto for about half a year since being dispatched to his post in Myrkviðr, and it would seem that during that time, or perhaps even during these last two months in his homeland beyond the heavens, something

significant had changed in him.

Skáviðr now felt that Yuuto seemed so much more mature and adult now than he had before.

The naive part of his mentality was now hidden from view, and instead, what was visible was something stronger, some sort of firm resolve.

There had been plenty of times before now where Yuuto had shown the spirit of a true conqueror, but that had always been limited and temporary, when he was filled with intense emotions.

But now, the air around him was calm, and yet he still held the aura of the proud and mighty lion.

The usually-calm Skáviðr spoke with his voice trembling with emotion. “You really have come back to us as a grown man!”

This was what it felt like to be a proud parent watching a child grow mature.

He had never said it outright, and never intended to either, but having lost his young child, Skáviðr had come to think of Yuuto as like his own son.

“Huh? Did I get taller or something?” Yuuto asked. “Oh, right, I haven’t seen you in about eight months now. I guess I would be taller.”

“Yes, you have grown in height, as well. But what I was referring to was your growth as a person.”

“Uhh, huh? Not sure I know what you’re talking about, myself... Well, I guess it is time I got my act together and started trying to become an adult, huh?” Yuuto stared out into the distance.

Skáviðr looked out in the same direction.

Though they were standing in the same place and gazing at the same scene, they were surely seeing very different things.

This young man was looking down from much higher, and seeing much farther, than he was.

That was what Skáviðr believed.

Epilogue

The Lightning Clan had retreated.

When the news reached lárnvíðr from Gimlé by carrier pigeon, the people of lárnvíðr broke out into cheers.

After the Wolf Clan's defeat at Élivágar River, it had only seemed like a matter of time until Gimlé fell as well, and yet everything turned on its head within a day of Yuuto's return.

"As expected of our patriarch!" The people shouted this to each other, and embraced one another. They celebrated with all their hearts the removal of the existential threat to their lives.

Jörgen, the Wolf Clan second-in-command, was forced to scold them about this. "Hey, hey, now, don't forget that out west, the Panther Clan is still surrounding the city of Fólkvangr. It's too early to get too comfortable."

But even as he said that, he couldn't hide his own smile.

"Kristina must have sent a report back to the Claw Clan," he added. "We've just received a message from their patriarch Botvid that he will be willing to send us soldiers. With luck, the other clans who were sitting on the fence should come back firmly to our side as well before long. This is all thanks to you, Mother." Jörgen bowed his head to Mitsuki, who looked a bit surprised.

"Uweh? Um, it wasn't really me; it was mostly Lady Rífa who should take credit. And Felicia, too."

Mitsuki was in the inner palace garden, lying in the sun with her arms wrapped around the garmr puppy, Hildólfr.

Hildólfr was really quite well-behaved. According to Yuuto, he had been strictly trained by Sigrún to be obedient to humans. Even now, he was lazily yawning in the sun next to Mitsuki.

That said, it didn't change the fact that he was a great wolf, a garmr. And though still practically a puppy, Hildólfr was over half a year old now. He was already as big as a fully grown normal wolf.

And yet when Mitsuki had first laid eyes on him, she had reacted not with fear, but by shouting, “Wow! So fluffy!” and leaping to hug him. This was one of the many tales told about Mitsuki in lárarviðr now.

Mitsuki still wasn’t aware of how her behavior had garnered her such an incredible reputation among the populace of the Wolf Clan.

“Then it was also thanks to the fact that you share a special bond with Lady Rífa, Mother,” Jörgen went on. “Please tell Lady Rífa for us that the whole of the Wolf Clan is grateful to her, from the bottom of our hearts.”

“Ah, right. I will.” Mitsuki nodded, but she looked somewhat troubled.

In truth, right after Yuuto’s summoning had succeeded, Mitsuki had tried to thank Rífa.

However, perhaps the effects of Mistilteinn had worn off completely by then — the image of Rífa had completely disappeared.

Afterward, Mitsuki had gone to bed hoping to thank Rífa in her dreams, but she hadn’t been able to join Rífa’s dream.

This was the first time that had happened.

At that point, it had started to bother Mitsuki that during the summoning, Rífa’s right arm had seemed to dissipate. Perhaps some serious problem had happened with her real body, too.

“I hope I can see her tonight,” Mitsuki whispered to herself.

But that did not come to pass that night, nor the next night, nor the night after that. Mitsuki was unable to meet Rífa in her dreams.

Epilogue II

“U-Uncle Yuuto of the Wolf Clan?! S-so you truly were alive after all!”

“Hey there. Sorry for making you guys in the Horn Clan worry too.”

The day after the Lightning Clan retreated from Gimlé, Yuuto showed himself before the main body of the Horn Clan army, in a location some one hundred and fifty kilometers away.

Even for the expert horse riders in the Múspell special forces, the most distance one could manage on horseback in one day was seventy kilometers. If one were to ride in an emergency without regard for the next horse’s health the next day, the most would still be about one hundred kilometers.

And furthermore, Yuuto couldn’t ride on his own. He always had Felicia take him on her horse. Naturally, with two people on one horse, there was less distance you could cover in one day.

And despite all of that, Yuuto had managed to travel this long distance in the span of one full day, thanks to the “post station system.”

This system was made to provide for the rapid, continuous transport of people, goods, and messages. It was said that the concept behind it first came about during the seventh century B.C.E., in the Assyrian empire.

Obviously, horses are living creatures. They grew fatigued by running and being ridden, and their average pace constantly got slower over time. The usual solution would be to periodically walk them slowly and let them rest.

But here was where the post station system came into play. At certain fixed distances along the main roads, the post stations were constructed, and kept stocked with fresh horses to ride. So, a messenger could switch to a fresh horse at each station, one after the other, and constantly travel at the fastest horseback speed possible.

Following the Assyrian Empire, there was the Achaemenid Empire of Persia, which conquered the lands of the ancient Orient. The Achaemenid Empire’s version of the post station system along their “King’s Road” is said to have

made it possible to travel some 2,700 kilometers in only seven days.

In Yggdrasil, the post station system had already been put in place to a decent degree by the first divine emperor Wotan, some two hundred years prior when he'd conquered and united the empire.

Yuuto had utilized this system to travel quickly from Iárnviðr to Gimlé, then from Gimlé to the Fólkvangr area.

"Now that Uncle Yuuto, the renowned commander, has come to us, our battle is surely as good as won," Haugspori said confidently. "Now then, what reinforcements have you brought with you to us?" There was great anticipation in his eyes.

According to the intel from Kristina, the Horn Clan forces were caught in a dilemma. The city of Fólkvangr was surrounded by the Panther Clan, yet the troops here couldn't move freely because of the even larger force of Panther Clan soldiers on the opposite shore of the river.

It seems like they had a lot of faith that because he, the patriarch, had come himself, he must have brought a great deal of reinforcements with him.

"I've got five people, including myself." Yuuto gestured with his chin at the people who were standing behind him.

Felicia, Sigrún, Albertina, Kristina. The four of them were indeed strong and proud Einherjar of the Wolf Clan, but... a look of despair spread across Haugspori's face.

The Panther Clan army numbered over ten thousand in total. A mere addition of five more fighters wasn't going to change the difference in their strengths. That was what Yuuto could read clearly from the man's expression.

For Yuuto's part, he would have liked to bring the elite special forces unit with him as well, but most post stations along the roads had only had five horses.

And one of the horses had needed to be used to carry their belongings, so the number of people he could bring was limited.

Furthermore, his greatest combat asset, Sigrún, was still in pain after her recent bout with Steinþórr, and couldn't fight at her full strength yet.

Even so, that wasn't going to pose a problem.

"Don't worry. We'll chase off the Panther Clan in no time. I can't afford to waste any time here, after all." Yuuto said this softly, but with a sense of finality. There was an aura about him, a fighting spirit that seemed to burn quietly.

Even though that flame was not directed at him, Haugspori instinctively took one step back, and swallowed.

Yuuto turned and stared into the distance, toward the direction of Fólkvangr.

He whispered, "All right, Big Brother. I think it's about time you and I settled things between us."

To Be Continued...

Afterword

Hi, it's Takayama, the man who's been kept so occupied with moving houses and uploading to the *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* website that he once again put himself through production hell.

Hello.

It's been a while.

So, after growing up and living in Kanazawa for thirty-seven years, I've moved out to the Gotō City area in Nagasaki Prefecture, which is a city across several separate islands.

Oh and by the way, Satsuki Yoshino-sensei, who writes the manga *Barakamon*, lives just a few kilometers away from me.

As expected of the setting for *Barakamon*, this place is pretty rural.

On *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, it looks like the whole "slow life" movement is trending, but out here, it really is a slow-paced life.

I'm sure those people that live in the hectic city probably dream of living the slow life, but in reality, it's got its own issues, oh boy.

Weeding the yard is a total pain.

It's really far to the supermarket just for groceries.

The Kyushu dialect makes it kinda hard to understand what people are saying.

I haven't seen any yet, but I've heard there are weasels.

I've started getting snakes in my garden, so I've had to kill them with a shovel.

And there aren't a lot of bookstores! (This is the biggest issue.)

Well, still, my daughter's outside running around having fun with her friends, and you can get good shellfish out of the river and the sea here, and the silverberries in my garden are edible (there are supposed to be pears in the fall!), so maybe this place is good to raise a kid in.

Now, then... volume 8 is done!

With my previous work *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki (Pandora Box)*, I maxed out at seven volumes, so this is a new personal record!

Hoorayyyy!

This is all thanks to you readers. Thank you all very much.

In regard to the content of this volume, I consider this as having gone past one of the major turning points of the story, but I'm planning to continue the series for quite a bit, so please stick with me until the very end.

Oh, and as for the major plot points in the last volume and this volume, during the early planning stages, it was all still pretty vague in my head, but once I started writing, after two and a half years, I finally caught up to this point that I'd planned out, so it really makes me feel something special.

Hey, actually, now that I say that, at first I had thought about putting the previous volume and this volume's story together as one book and doing it that way, but wow, that was really a stupid idea.

I'm already into my fifth year of doing this, but I'm always looking at my mistakes, wondering, *Am I ever going to get a little better at judging how long it's going to take to do things?*

Well, in any case, this was an episode of the series that I really struggled with, but I would love it if it's something you readers can enjoy.

I touched on this a little bit in the afterword for the last volume, but about the work I've been uploading to the *Narō* website: *Ryuu to Shoujo to Amakakeru Kishi (The Dragon, the Girl, and the Soaring Knight)* was the title before, but it's gained enough popularity that HJ Novels is going to let me publish it through them, as *Maou-goroshi no Ryuu-kishi (The Dragon Knight Who Slew the Demon Lord)*.

I think it's a pretty interesting story, if I do say so myself, but I'd been a bit worried about how it would fare if I tried to actually put it out for the market. But with the support of my readers, it's going to become a published book, so I'm really relieved about that.

Actually, this work is something I wrote when I was still an amateur — my last work written before going pro.

I wrote it when it had been just one year since I'd decided to become a light novel author, and it's sort of a compilation of everything I learned over that year. Well, it really felt good when I wrote it, but there were some circumstances that left it collecting dust on the back shelf for a while. That's what makes it so moving to see it get published.

I hope I can count on your support for that series, too.

I should be able to post information on the sale dates and the illustrator and such pretty soon, so please check the HJ Bunko website for the latest info.

Now then, I shall dedicate my thanks.

To my editor, M-sama. I am saddened to hear the news that you will be leaving HJ.

It's been five years now since that time we met, when I was a clueless newbie. You have taken care of me in so many ways.

My chronic lateness, my tendency to stir up trouble at the last minute... I know I've caused you plenty of headaches. But you were steadfast and patient with me all the while. Thank you, truly, for everything.

From the time I first entered the application process for HJ, you promoted my work to them, and I can say that the only reason the professional author Seiichi Takayama is here right now is because of you.

Wherever you go next, good luck, and do your best.

If you get the chance, I'd like to meet up again in a few years, and we can kick back and share stories about the good old days!

And to my new editor, U-sama. I look forward to working with you! I hope we get along well together.

To my illustrator, Yukisan-sensei. This cover art is the best! I hope we can keep working together in the future.

And my sincere thanks goes out to all of the many other people involved in the production of this volume, who helped make it happen.

Most of all, to you readers who are holding this book in your hands right now, I offer you my deepest thanks.

With that, I leave you with the wish that we might see each other again, in volume 9.

Seiichi Takayama

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 8

by Seiichi Takayama

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